

FOR SHAME:
EMOTION, GENDER, AND INNOVATION
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

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This dissertation argues that the British novel was shaped to a large and as yet unexplored extent by shame. While shame might appear the hallmark of Victorian repression, I examine how its revisionary potential works through nineteenth-century novelistic form, troubling limited constructions of gendered subjectivity, social roles, and modes of literary engagement. From the genre's inception, novelists and readers courted the shame—linked to the excessively emotional and feminine—that marked novelistic production and consumption. Rather than disavow or downplay such shame, however, nineteenth-century novelists often embraced and reimagined it. Elizabeth Bennet's "mortifying perusal" of Darcy's letter, Jane Eyre's humiliation before the classroom at Lowood, Becky Sharp's scandalous exposure when caught with Lord Steyne: in these scenes, innovations in novelistic form occur not in spite of shame, but through it. Reading such scenes of shame in works by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Du Maurier, I show how influential experiments in narrative technique engage shame as a model of self-conscious reflection, narration, and reading that refines the novel's form and cultural status by redefining the implications of close contact with feminized emotion. Such displays of shameful self-consciousness countered the widespread denigration of irrational feminine emotiveness that haunted the novelist and novel reader throughout the century, offering instead an analytic yet still emotionally charged form of investment in literary and social conventions. By placing these texts in dialogue with

historical and current theories of emotion that highlight shame's capacity to forge identity and social attachments in ways that do not depend on strict identification with others or with social norms more broadly, I approach nineteenth-century novels as incisive theorizations of shame in their own right. In thus helping us to think beyond a stark binary of identification or critical detachment, novelistic shame enriches ongoing discussions of the stakes of emotional investments—in others, in social conventions, and in literature.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ashly Bennett received a B.A. in English with departmental honors and university distinction from Stanford University. In her graduate work at Cornell University, she has specialized in nineteenth-century British literature with a minor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Biographical Sketch	iii
	Acknowledgements	iv
	List of Figures	vi
	Introduction	1
1	Shame and Sensibility: Jane Austen and the Humiliated Heroine	23
2	“Half Ashamed of Being Caught in the Melting Mood”: Shame and Sentimentality in <i>Vanity Fair</i>	93
3	“Erring as I”: <i>Jane Eyre</i> ’s Shameful Revisions of Victorian Sympathy	156
	Coda: “At the Bottom of All”	203

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1 | “Paper X,” *Clarissa* 41
- Figure 2 | Illustration, Chapter XXVI, *Vanity Fair* 126
- Figure 3 | “The letter before Waterloo,” *Vanity Fair* 129
- Figure 4 | “Shame,” *Chironomia* 130
- Figure 5 | “Contempt,” *Practical illustrations of rhetorical gesture and action* 131
- Figure 6 | “Virtue rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair.” *Vanity Fair* 152
- Figure 7 | “Authors’ Miseries No. 1,” *Punch* 154

INTRODUCTION

FOR SHAME

Consider, to begin, the following brief montage, culled from the nineteenth-century British novel's prodigious inventory of shame:

"Oh Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame . . . How can you—how dare you have such wicked, revengeful thoughts?"

"—do, for shame; an' come an' go on with your patch-work, like a little lady."

"shame on ye! sit ye dahn, ill childer! they's good books enough if you'll read 'em."

"For shame! for shame! . . . What shocking conduct Miss Eyre."

Together these moments—from *Vanity Fair*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre*, respectively—illustrate the invocation of shame that ushers many of the nineteenth-century novel's most famously mortified heroines into its narratives and onto the literary scene.¹ In mapping the conspicuously rich and troublesome site, and source, of shame presented by the nineteenth-century British novel, it is worth lingering briefly on the shaming that starts *Jane Eyre*, that novel whose eponymous narrator has been dubbed the "heroine of fulfillment" and whose "I" has been widely understood as a model of engaging and empowered female voice.² Anger and sympathy have attained pride of place in feminist assessments of *Jane Eyre*'s highly emotive voice and of nineteenth-century novelistic feelings more

¹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Norton, 1994), 10; George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 13; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2003), 17; Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1987), 9.

² Elaine Showalter reads Jane Eyre as the "heroine of fulfillment" in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 112. Carla Kaplan provides a useful overview of feminist criticism's longstanding investment in reading Jane Eyre's personal fulfillment and ownership in relation to her authentic and empowered voice: noting that Jane "does move from silence to speech, thus providing a model of feminist resistance and liberation," Kaplan finds it "hardly . . . surprising that feminist criticism would borrow much of its romance with women's narration, its metaphors of voice, and its own self-understanding as an enterprise from this novel" (6). See "Girl Talk: *Jane Eyre* and the Romance of Women's Narration," *Novel* 30, no. 1 (1996): 5-31.

generally—yet what are we to make of the emotion that inspires the first diegetic mention of Jane Eyre’s surname, and punctuates her physical imprisonment in the metaphorically rich red-room as a young girl—“For shame! for shame! . . . What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre”?³ This call “for shame” suggests that shame constitutes both an introduction of “Miss Eyre” to the reader and an interpellation of Jane into the contours of gendered interiority and social relations.

We might imagine the call “for shame” as the invasive voice of society threatening to repress the more authentic self-expression of the angry Jane, or, perhaps, as an affective force imposed from outside the individual that exposes the disciplinary violence inflicted by all emotions, even those seemingly more personal and salutary feelings like sympathy. In the chapters that follow, however, I explore the implications of the formative call “for shame”—for *Jane Eyre* and for the nineteenth-century novel more broadly—as it weaves into the presentation of characters’ interiorities and social relations, and into novels’ structures and narrative techniques, in forms not easily accounted for as either pronounced repression or covert Foucauldian discipline. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, the feminist potential of the novel’s distinctive voice largely emanates from Brontë’s formal enactment of a shame that mingles with and negotiates the extremes of anger’s potentially antisocial alienation and sympathy’s potentially oppressive socialization. The novel’s initial demand “for shame” accompanies Jane’s experience of being forced into the red-room and “thrust . . . upon a stool,” yet it sets in motion a series of shameful spectacles that Jane, as

³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar position Jane Eyre’s anger as central to her “rebellious feminism” in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), 338. Criticism that has more recently shifted the focus to sympathy in *Jane Eyre* includes: Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 139; Lorri G. Nandrea, “Desiring Difference: Sympathy and Sensibility in *Jane Eyre*,” *Novel* 37, no. 1/2 (2003): 112-34; Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race and Power, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Lara Freeburg Kees, “‘Sympathy’ in *Jane Eyre*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 45, no. 4 (2005): 873-97.

character and narrator, embodies, witnesses *and* stages with increasing agency, aesthetic control and erotic investment.⁴ In many respects *Jane Eyre* crystallizes the novelistic form of shame that I trace across the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on work by Jane Austen, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë in which shame-inflected narration intersects with physical spectacles of shame to fashion—in lieu of a sympathetic sameness—intimate relations of difference among characters, between present and past selves and, in a more formal sense, between experience and narration, story and discourse, and reader and text.

These writers, I contend, do novel things with the novel's shame. From the genre's inception the novel was hounded by a shame closely tied to cultural degradations of the feminine more generally. As William Warner recounts, an early response to "the cultural scandal of novel reading" was neatly to demarcate and displace the stigma of the "licentious, fantasy-ridden, and debased" somewhere else.⁵ Thus the "elevated novel of the 1740s" made inroads to respectability through constructions of "degraded and immoral" precursors like Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Eliza Haywood—writers whose works were deemed by mid-century critics "distinctly feminine addictions" and similarly depicted into the next century as "inappropriately erotic, too feminine, too European, too immoral."⁶ Yet any mid-century elevations of the novel failed to rise above shame, which proliferated especially in the century's last decades when numerous factors combined to aggravate longstanding concerns over the feminized novelist and novel reader.

During the century in which "guilt, shame, and danger came to be so sharply focused" on onanism, the public found in the novel, according to Thomas Laqueur, a

⁴ Brontë, 9.

⁵ William Warner, "Licensing Pleasure: Literary History and the Novel in Early Modern Britain," in *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, ed. John Richetti (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 18, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, 16, 13.

potent “counterpoint of masturbation.”⁷ And it was female novel readers who were cast as “the prototypical absorbed readers”: “just as the woman masturbator was the poster girl of dangerous solitary sex—she produced nothing but desire, pure libidinous pleasure—the woman reader was the gold standard of the moral corruption latent in all fiction.”⁸ The young woman, by Laqueur’s account, figured as the shamefully “misguided reader par excellence, the enthralled reader, the prototypical victim of imaginative excess, the representative of ‘the literary marketplace rather than the literary public,’ the perfect onanist.”⁹

If the female reader condensed qualities perceived as latent in all novel readers over the eighteenth century, the dramatic rise, at the century’s end, in the production and popularity of novels penned by women novelists and consumed by a growing female audience only fueled understandings of the novel as a mortifyingly feminine habit. The intensifying critique of sensibility in the 1780s and 1790s, reaching its peak in response to the French Revolution, additionally rendered sentimental indulgence in the novel an increasingly embarrassing, feminizing extravagance that also looked, to many, shamefully reckless.¹⁰ Deidre Lynch outlines one powerful novelistic response, at the turn into the nineteenth century, to the perceived “problem of the promiscuous circulation and universal exchangeability” that concentrated on “vulgar” feminized novelists and readers seen as trafficking in the cheap and ready wares of an “accelerated print market.”¹¹ Romantic novelists, she argues, countered this perception with heroines distinguished by their privatized, domesticated style of

⁷ Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone, 2003), 186, 303.

⁸ Ibid., 340.

⁹ Ibid., 340. The quotation is from John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 103.

¹⁰ Markman Ellis outlines the increased debate over sensibility in these decades in “‘The Dangerous Tendency of Novels’ and the Controversy of Sentimentalism” in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996).

¹¹ Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 132, 127, 130.

reading, a style that offered to those characters—and by extension to the novel readers emulating while also closely reading them—“the opportunity to certify their powers of taste, mental discipline, and sympathetic identification” in order to “affirm their *individual* distinction” in a print culture “rapidly becoming a *mass* market.”¹²

While Lynch shows how the cultivation of sympathetic identification could be invoked against the threatened “vulgar[ity]” of superficial and overly public consumption, the very depths of sympathy fending off one type of degradation invited shame of another sort that warrants closer attention. For with the consolidation of the ideology of separate spheres in the nineteenth century and its reification of woman’s “natural” domestic proclivities, a widespread cultural investment in a feminine predisposition for sympathetic indulgence continued to undermine the status of the woman reader and the novels she preferred, even as women’s reading practices and the novel as a genre were carving out a more legitimate place in the home and in female education. Kate Flint’s wide-reaching survey of Victorian constructions of the woman reader helps to illuminate this persistent source of shame: “Over-identification with the characters about whom one was reading, and a capacity to be emotionally, irrationally stirred, even to the point of imitation, by their example, were the most frequently remarked characteristics of the woman reader in the mid-nineteenth century . . . women, it was believed, could not help reading in this way, since they were biologically programmed for motherhood, and a capacity for sympathetic identification with the feelings of others was considered a sign of maternal worth.”¹³

The perfect Victorian housewife, it seems, could still slide too easily, and through the very qualities that ostensibly made her so well-suited for domesticity, into excessively

¹² Ibid., 131-32.

¹³ Kate Flint, “Women, Men, and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*,” in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, eds. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 252. Flint presents a more extensive version of this argument in *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

“stirred,” solipsistic reveries that recall those of “the perfect onanist.”

Thus, despite significant advances in the novel’s respectability and aesthetic legitimacy over the nineteenth century, authors and readers during the period courted the shame—linked to the excessively emotional and feminine—that marked novelistic production and consumption. Rather than downplay or disavow this shame, however, many influential novelists embraced and reimagined it, integrating spectacles of shame into their plots and engaging feminized shame as a model of narration and a desired mode of reading. Elizabeth Bennet’s “mortifying perusal” of Darcy’s letter, Jane Eyre’s humiliation before the classroom at Lowood, Becky Sharp’s scandalous exposure when caught with Lord Steyne: in these scenes, innovations in novelistic form occur not in spite of shame, but through it. Reading such scenes of shame in works by Austen, Thackeray and Brontë, I show how the negotiation of shame motivates some of the most significant features of their styles and of nineteenth-century novelistic technique more broadly, including free indirect discourse, direct address, and retrospective narration. Shame provides a basis for these novelists’ attempts to refine the genre’s form and cultural status by redefining the implications of close contact with feminized emotion, and by positioning shame as a productive means for revising—rather than simply normalizing or suppressing—emotionally charged aspects of gendered subjectivity, social relations, and literary engagement.

SHAME’S FORM

Theorists of emotion have been drawn to shame’s ability to produce compelling, embodied spectacles that exert a strong relational pull without reinforcing strict identification with others, or with social norms more broadly. Certainly social norms, and a communal sense of those norms, can create punitive shameful spectacles; at the same time, however, both the shamed subject and the spectator can recognize the signified shame, and even feel for others through shared proximity to that shame,

without fully accepting it as their own interior emotional content or demanding it of another. The spectacle of shame can compel identificatory socialization; but it can also produce more differentiated relations around the form of shame.

To delineate shame's productive features, I approach its form through the lens of recent feminist and queer theory, affect theory and narrative theory, as well as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic theory. I take my most basic working definition of shame from Silvan Tomkins' formulation that it is an interruption of a communicative connection: "The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame."¹⁴ Shame's paradigmatic posture of the bowed head in Tomkins' work captures the important, "incomplete" quality of shame's disrupted connection with another: shame is a look down, but not a look completely away. Distinguishing shame-humiliation from contempt-disgust, Tomkins makes this lingering investment in reconnection constitutive of shame: "Shame-humiliation is the negative affect linked with love and identification, and contempt-disgust the negative affect linked with individuation and hate. Both affects are impediments to intimacy and communion, within the self and between the self and others. But shame-humiliation does not renounce the object permanently, whereas contempt-disgust does."¹⁵

In considering shame's role in the historical production and reception of the novel, I am especially interested in its narrative form. Or, in the terms conceptualized by contemporary theorists like Brian Massumi, I focus on shame *as an emotion*—as an affect that has undergone "sociolinguistic fixing" and insertion into "semantically and

¹⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition*, vol. 2. *The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 2008), 353-54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits.”¹⁶

Placing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s account of shame alongside Adam Smith’s mid-eighteenth-century theory of sympathy (which, as we will see, also advances a less explicit theorization of shame) can especially illuminate the “narrativizable . . . circuits” of shame. Both Sedgwick and Smith approach shame through thought experiments that not only highlight the oddly individuated relationality that shame can accommodate, but also suggest how shame’s relational potential might be a function of form, especially of the staging of a contagiously emotive spectacle that can be incorporated in varying ways into social scenarios and cultural and personal narratives. The theories of Smith and Sedgwick provide for the chapters that follow a suggestive background against which to read nineteenth-century literary innovation, bringing into relief the revisionary valence of the shameful spectacle as a function specifically of novelistic form—a dynamic I term shameful signification.

Sedgwick, drawing on Tomkins’ work, investigates shame’s disruptions of identification—disruptions that do not, as a result, obliterate interest, communication, or identity. Using the posture of lowered eyes and bowed head to capture shame’s distinctive relationality, she focuses on the protoform “moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child’s face and the caregiver’s recognized face . . . is broken”¹⁷ This prototypical “disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication,” exemplifies Sedgwick’s more generalized assertion that shame can round out and fuel such a circuit—rather than just break it—by ushering in new forms of communication and new forms of identity-constitution less dependent on absolute interest or identification (36). Shame, she writes, “is itself a

¹⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 28.

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 36. Further references will appear in the text.

form of communication. Blazons of shame, the ‘fallen face’ with eyes down and head averted . . . are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge”; likewise, “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity” (36). Shame simultaneously operates as a truly theatrical performance of disconnection, in the sense that it is dramatized for the other, and as a performative act, in the sense that it makes the self. Sedgwick thus describes “the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality,” as it “mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity” (37, 38).

Sedgwick’s efforts to recuperate shame depend, to a certain extent, on emphasizing its basic structural capacity for forging identity and communication in ways that do not depend on strict identification and, in fact, thrive on identification’s inevitable breakdowns. Through such emphasis, she pressures understandings of shame as purely prohibitive or repressive, instead casting shame as an affective mode that can accommodate—even drive—identificatory elasticity and revision within still legible and sociable identity and group formations. This space of revision, rather than pure rupture, depends on shame’s potent communicative quality. Sedgwick locates an alternative social glue in the fact that “shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating,” and this strangely individualized contagion stems, I argue, from shame’s form (36).

Although the form of shame I am underlining is not discussed by Sedgwick, it can be seen in an extended scenario with which she illustrates shame’s contagious quality. She recounts that in lectures on the topic of shame,

I used to ask listeners to join in a thought experiment, visualizing an unwashed, half-insane man who would wander into the lecture hall mumbling loudly, his speech increasingly accusatory and disjointed, and publicly urinate in front of the room, then wander out again. I pictured the excruciation of everyone else in the room: each looking down, wishing to be anywhere else yet conscious of the

inexorable fate of being exactly there, inside the individual skin of which each was burningly aware; at the same time, though, unable to staunch the hemorrhage of painful identification with the misbehaving man. (37)

Here, the odd structure of “painful identification” evokes shame’s capacity to bind individuals through spectacular, visualized form despite unstable content. For Sedgwick’s “misbehaving man” displays little or no shame of his own; instead what is noteworthy is his apparent lack of it. The shame the audience catches, then, comes from recognizable form without certain content, from a scenario that demands shame according to social convention, while its primary signifying subject does not have to feel it for it to be transmitted to others. The shameful scenario binds members of the audience without the affective content of shame truly belonging to them, either; what Sedgwick calls their “painful identification with the misbehaving man” is in some sense an identification with a *lack* of required shame: it evacuates each audience member’s shame even as the scenario produces and spreads it. To the extent that the audience member comes into even closer proximity to shame than its apparent source—the “misbehaving man”—“identification” fails really to be established at all.

Just as the shame in this thought experiment proves hard to pin down, its results are also difficult to fix: Sedgwick “picture[s]” the audience’s “painful identification,” but one could imagine shame’s “double movement” veering “toward painful individuation,” with onlookers feeling less connection through shame than anger with or contempt for the “misbehaving man,” and trying to put squarely on him the shame he maddeningly refuses. Or the movement could swerve “toward uncontrollable relationality,” with the man fully succumbing to shame and closely identifying witnesses feeling similarly overcome. Sedgwick’s thought experiment lingers, however, on the space between these poles, the oscillating “movement” along a spectrum of opposition and identification that constitutes shame’s productive terrain. Her spectacularly shameful scenario thus lays bare the *form* of a shame that can

produce relational transactions—akin but not reducible to “identification”—in which, despite “the excruciation of everyone,” no one actually owns the circulating shame.

The distinction I am drawing between shame’s fluid relationality and one of stricter identification depends on recognizing a number of distinctions within Sedgwick’s thought experiment itself: between the scenario, the signifying body of the “misbehaving man,” and each individual’s interior emotional content. In fleshing out these distinctions, we can usefully turn to another thought experiment that engages the same features, but puts them to the opposite use of solidifying identification: Adam Smith’s oft-cited example of sympathy with “our brother upon the rack.”¹⁸ Smith introduces his theorization of sympathy—the centerpiece of his influential *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759—with an image of sympathy at the height of its effect. The relational goal is the closest emotional equivalence possible: while Smith acknowledges that individualized sensations and senses pose barriers to actual transmission of the “immediate experience of what other men feel,” representational features nonetheless can align to convey, with a certain immediacy, feelings that, “though weaker in degree,” are “not altogether unlike” the feelings of others. The most important of these features is the scenario—the “like situation”:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case . . . By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. (11-12)

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 11. Further references will appear in the text.

In Smith's account, sympathy works primarily through the pull of the scenario and its capacity to facilitate the spectator's imaginative insertion into it. But the sympathetic transmission of pain in this example depends not only on the dramatic, encompassing scenario of the rack, but also on the way that this particular scenario minimizes representational or responsive wiggle room, violently forcing continuity between scenario, signifying body, and interior emotional content in order to guarantee unambiguous and quick communication to the sympathetic spectator. The hyperbolically constrictive structure of the scenario pins the signifying body into a highly visible and legible place with a limited range of likely emotional responses, virtually ensuring suffering as both the victim's and the viewer's only, near-identical response. The rack captures sympathy's most seamless workings, modeling its spectacular and transparent signification and connecting such representational techniques with the relational imperative of emotional equivalence between individuals as the grounds of intimacy and sociability. The rack exemplifies, for Smith, the form of sympathy, a form whose spectacular emotional pull is similar to that of the form of shame in Sedgwick's thought experiment, but which significantly demands the neat alignment of interior emotional content as well.

Smith's *Theory* also, however, illustrates how historical accounts of sympathy themselves sought to loosen the rigidity of sympathetic imperatives, turning to shame in the process of imagining other forms of individualized relations. Shame emerges in Smith's text as a feeling that marks and fills the cracks of sympathy's fragility. Next to the rack, one could place his invocation of the pillory to figure an alternative relational model, built around shame, that the text gingerly but consistently approaches:

A brave man is not rendered contemptible by being brought to the scaffold; he is, by being set in the pillory. His behaviour in the one situation may gain him universal esteem and admiration. No behaviour in the other can render him

agreeable. The sympathy of the spectators supports him in the one case, and saves him from that shame, that consciousness that his misery is felt by himself only, which is of all sentiments the most unsupportable. There is no sympathy in the other; or, if there is any, it is not with his pain, which is a trifle, but with his consciousness of the want of sympathy with which this pain is attended. It is with his shame, not with his sorrow. Those who pity him, blush and hang down their heads for him. He droops in the same manner, and feels himself irrecoverably degraded by the punishment, though not by the crime. (71)

Smith initially notes shame as merely the affective sign of obliterated sympathy:

shame is synonymous with the man in the pillory's "consciousness that his misery is felt by himself only." He immediately retreats from this extreme notion of shame, though, positioning it more specifically as an aftermath to ruptured sympathy. A connection felt by the spectator, restricted to a shared sense of the man's shame, takes the place of sympathy's more complete alignment of emotion. The assertion that "There is no sympathy in the other" is qualified: "or, if there is any, it is not with his pain, which is a trifle, but with his consciousness of the want of sympathy with which this pain is attended." The disruption of sympathy itself opens up a space of near-sympathetic connection around a shared awareness of sympathy's breakdown. In the possibility that one can still sympathize with the man in the pillory's "shame," if "not with his sorrow," a relational space unfolds that is not quite sympathy, and that relies on the mutual recognition that sympathy is compromised and complete sympathetic identification is impossible. Shame's continued relationality depends on the "consciousness of the want of sympathy" that is embedded within it—an embedding of lack quite different from the mere absence of sympathy.

The physical mirroring of the sympathetic spectacle remains intact, here, but with dramatically different signification. Rather than acting as transparent signs of interior emotional content and its identical communication, the heads we see "droop[ing] in the same manner" bespeak a relational disconnection that resists equivalence but also avoids total illegibility. Incorporating aspects of the rack's

sympathetic signification, Smith's pillory theatrically demands recognition and response: this form, however, encompasses a range of emotional options and interpretive possibilities that can still constitute communication and sociability, if not of sympathy's ideal kind. On the one hand, the scenario spectacularly binds the man and his observers despite varied emotional states. On the other hand, the scenario also accommodates a split within the victim's own experience of shame, as he "feels himself irrecoverably degraded by the punishment, though not by the crime." Similar to the shame-forged sympathy that is not *quite* sympathy, the victim is both shamed and not ashamed: he has a palpable relation to the form of shame, but does not entirely possess its intended content. Even more than in Sedgwick's thought experiment, the signifying body and its spectators are here linked by the irresistible contagion of a punitive form embodying social convention, while none are fully conscripted into its universalizing mandates.

SHAMEFUL SIGNIFICATION

The nineteenth-century novel exhibits and extends the sorts of relational and representational permutations of sympathy (and of related affective modes such as sensibility and sentimentality) that theoretical valorizations of sympathy, like Smith's *Theory*, were themselves pursuing. Novelists such as Austen, Thackeray and Brontë employ formal shifts in novelistic representation that could be considered shameful signification, as opposed to—but also deeply entwined with—sentimental signification. A rich body of critical work has delineated how formal strategies support the affective aim of sympathetic identification in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development of the British novel: drawing on such work, I characterize sentimental signification as a set of narrative techniques defined by, and pursuing, an ideal of sympathetic continuity between interior emotional content and

the signifying body, and between feeling subjects (including characters and readers) linked through emotional identification, physical mirroring, and identically shared feelings.¹⁹ An alternative representational mode of shameful signification emerges in tandem and in tension with sentimental signification in the eighteenth century, and becomes increasingly important in shaping formal features of the nineteenth-century novel.

As deployed and developed in the nineteenth-century novel, shameful signification engages the representational techniques that sentimental novelists used for sympathetic mimesis and adapts these techniques to accommodate greater emotional disjunctions among characters, between text and reader, and among readers. The novelistic exploration of the ideological and formal potential of shame draws on the compelling, spectacular form of shame that we find in both Smith and Sedgwick, a form that can relationally bind individuals through shameful scenario and signifying body, while loosening the rigid continuity of interior emotional content. Formal strategies of shameful signification seek shame's distinctive relational pull not only through the staging of physical spectacles in the novel's plot, but also through effects of narration that mimic and stretch these spectacles' accommodation of individualized difference. In this study I treat the innovative ways in which Austen, Thackeray and Brontë narrate shame as particularly rich instances of shameful signification that exemplify how nineteenth-century novelists significantly, if variously, enact shame in story *and* discourse—using it to motivate dramatic plot points *and* innovative narrative techniques, to stage social spectacles of shame *along with* a distinctive way of telling

¹⁹ See, for example: G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992); Barbara M. Benedict, *Framing Feeling: Sentiment and Style in English Prose Fiction, 1745-1800* (New York: AMS Press, 1994); Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago P, 1995); John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996); and Janet M. Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

about them.

My emphasis on shameful signification reframes critical discussions of gender and emotion in nineteenth-century British literature and culture. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar map a feminist poetics that combines questions of gender with those of feeling and form, and positions one feeling—anger—as central to such concerns. Anger’s persistent critical preeminence in the wake of Gilbert and Gubar’s influential study has given way to a set of shifting yet related affective modes that dominate recent critical analysis of nineteenth-century feeling, from the crisis of sensibility at the start of the century, to the mid-century focus on sentimentality and sympathy, to the rise of sensationalism in the century’s later decades. The emerging body of criticism on these affective modes has usefully expanded the array of emotions being given attention and has redrawn the common late-eighteenth-century boundary for studies of British sympathy, sensibility, and sentimentalism, exploring their continued cultural and aesthetic relevance even after the decline of the “cult of sensibility.” In some cases, such as Nancy Armstrong’s work on the “logic” of sympathy and sensibility, the shift in affective focus coincides with an explicit reassessment of the emotional investments of Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist poetics.²⁰ In others, the widened purview enables a needed recovery of critically neglected feelings, with attention to their specificity in the nineteenth-century British context. Taking up the topic of Victorian sentimentality, Miriam Bailin argues, for example, that “the critical organizing principles that have provided common points of departure in discussions of eighteenth-century British or nineteenth-century American sentimental fiction do not

²⁰ In *How Novels Think*, Armstrong positions Gilbert and Gubar as representative of a problematic emphasis on compensatory forms of emotional private property in feminist interventions in novel studies, an emphasis that “convinced a generation of readers that acquiring a voice—access to print, or what might be called cultural agency—could compensate for the forms of property that traditionally authorized the rights-bearing citizen” (139-140).

adequately account for the Victorian British variety.”²¹ And introducing a special journal issue on “Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality,” Nicola Brown highlights the need for studies of sentimentality that will “open up public discussion of an aspect of Victorian culture that is too often ignored or maligned (even if surreptitiously enjoyed in private).”²² Recent writers on sympathy and sensibility similarly find these feelings unduly overlooked: Lorri Nandrea notes the “[s]urprisingly few critical studies of the status of sympathy and sensibility in Victorian fiction”—a scarcity that has begun to be redressed, over the last decade, in monographs by Audrey Jaffe, Rachel Ablow, and Amit Rai.²³

In part because shame is so frequently invoked by novelists to negotiate the perceived risks of emotional absorption concentrated, at different points in the century, on sensibility, sentimentality, sympathy, and sensationalism, I argue that shame is equally constitutive of the period’s aesthetic and social possibilities. Without flattening the specific contours of these affective modes—of sensibility as Austen conceives it, for instance, as opposed to Brontë’s concerns over sympathy or Thackeray’s over sentimentality—I trace the relational dynamics and signifying structures of sentimental signification that they share, which particularly come into view as each is revised through shameful signification. On the one hand, shame limns the workings of the affective modes whose conventions it breaches. In so doing, it illuminates a variously embodied, century-long anxiety over literary ideals of intense emotional identification, often also seen pejoratively as feminized over-identification,

²¹ Miriam Bailin, “‘Dismal Pleasure’: Victorian Sentimentality and the Pathos of the Parvenu,” *ELH* 66, no. 4 (1999): 1015.

²² Nicola Brown, “Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell,” *19: Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 4 (April 2007): 2.

²³ Lorri Nandrea, “Desiring Difference: Sympathy and Sensibility in *Jane Eyre*,” *Novel* 37, no. 1/2 (2003): 112. The first book-length project devoted to Victorian sympathy was Audrey Jaffe’s *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), which was followed by Amit S. Rai’s *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race and Power, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) and Rachel Ablow’s *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007).

emotional extravagance, irrationality, and susceptibility. On the other hand, even as shame anatomizes these anxieties and the conventions which produce them, it provides the novelists I consider with an alternative affective mode, one with the potential to disrupt analytically, without disengaging from, the emotional investments that suffuse feminized subjectivity and novel reading.

Adding shame to the mix of emotions under critical consideration thus expands our understanding of the range of feelings that shape gendered relations and reading practices in the nineteenth century, while also contributing to the developing criticism on other affective modes. Elucidating the fraught status of emotional identification in the period, shame also sharpens the view of how these anxieties were constellated in relation to anger and other emotional states considered attractively disruptive but also dangerously unsocial. Described in the broadest terms—terms that will acquire more nuanced elaboration throughout this study—Gilbert and Gubar’s celebration of anger’s subversive energy, animating a “rebellious feminism,” has been followed by increased trepidation over the normalizing effects of feeling in the construction of the modern gendered individual, especially when the feelings in question involve sympathy or sensationalism.²⁴ Novelistic engagements with shame demarcate a suggestive space between these two poles taking shape in the nineteenth-century public imagination, as novelists consistently turn to shame to mediate between the extremes of oppressively normalizing socialization (particularly associated with emotional over-identification) and the potentially antisocial alienation of rebellious emotion (such as anger) or of emotional retreat (such as ironic detachment). To be sure, shame functions for some novelists as a way of absolutely imposing critical distance on characters who over-identify or who misread—and on the novel’s own readers. Yet for other novelists, including those I consider here, shame is central to imagining a more fluid relation

²⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 338.

between emotional absorption and detachment, seemingly uncritical and critical reading practices—an interplay posited as necessary for complete, competent, and pleasurable interpretation. As I explore how novelists experiment with shameful signification to stretch shame’s potential as a relational, representational and hermeneutic alternative to the sympathetic imperative of strict identification, I pursue how this potential speaks to the problematic allure of identification within the history of the novel, but also in our current cultural climate. Throughout this study I turn to novelists who share an engagement with shame that can help us further to understand and shape the affective terms of ongoing discussions in feminist criticism of the possibilities and limitations of novelistic feelings.

READING SHAME

For Shame is comprised of three chapters and a coda that examine the significant interplay of emotion, gender and narrative innovation in the nineteenth-century British novel. My opening chapter complicates the tendency in feminist criticism to read shame as repression in Austen’s oeuvre, by contextualizing it within turn-of-the-century debates over the feminized vulnerability and excess of the “cult of sensibility” and its sentimental novels. I argue that *Northanger Abbey* (begun in 1798, posthumously published in 1818) positions the shamed heroine as a spectacular, emotionally compelling centerpiece, one designed to replace the sentimental, and particularly gothic, female corpse. As the deathly allure of the female corpse becomes a figure, in the novel, for an overly absorbed reading practice and the stagnant gothic conventions that inspire it, Austen imagines shame as one alternative for a reading “Miss” who “lays down her book” with either “affected indifference, or momentary shame.”²⁵ While later novels abandon *Northanger Abbey*’s explicit satire of gothic

²⁵ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (New York: Norton, 2004), 22.

tropes, the shaming of their heroines can be similarly understood as the pursuit of a “momentary shame” that can reanimate the sentimental conventions, cast as a corpse, that Austen refuses either to preserve morbidly or to bury indifferently. I trace how Austen’s narrative innovations, especially in free indirect discourse, revise the voicing of emotions employed by novelists like Samuel Richardson, Ann Radcliffe and Frances Burney who were variously invested in sensibility, enabling Austen to depict heroines whose brushes with humiliation—fleeting and psychological, as opposed to permanently physicalized—create new pleasures, rather than merely limiting the heroine’s desire, or the reader’s engagement, to the extremes of either sentimental stasis or “affected indifference.”

My second and third chapters turn to two immensely popular mid-century novels, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Published in 1847, both novels cultivate distinctive narrative voices that model a proximity to shame that productively extends across gendered characters and narratees as an eroticized meeting point between the male and female and, more broadly, the culturally masculine and feminine. In Chapter Two I consider the oft-noted literary self-consciousness of Thackeray’s style as a specifically shameful self-consciousness. By emphasizing self-consciousness as a feeling—one that is feminized in *Vanity Fair*—I complicate the widespread perception that Thackeray’s extremely self-conscious narration enacts a gendered emotional problem, a stark rupture between denigrated feminine sentimentality and contemptuous masculine detachment. Rather than mocking all feminized emotion as woefully passive and unreflective, Thackeray’s narrative voice—and particularly his direct address—portrays feminized shame as an alternative to sentimental excess. The shameful spectacles of the novel’s dual female protagonists become models for both a style of narration and mode of readerly engagement that can facilitate emotionally charged analysis, avoiding the hazardous

extremes of self-indulgent sentimentality or callous critical detachment.

While feminist criticism has been wary of *Vanity Fair*'s narratorial voice, the retrospective autobiographical narration in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has been widely viewed as a model of empowering female voice. In my third chapter I argue that the feminist potential of Jane Eyre's voice largely emanates from its enactment of a shame that mediates between the problematic extremes of rebellious anger and sympathetic submission—extremes that seem, at the novel's start, to constitute the limited range of both affective options for the characters and representational options for the novel itself. Turning attention from Jane's much-discussed crisis in the red-room to her less-analyzed school shamings, shared with Helen Burns, I explore how a shame-inflected narrating voice intersects with physical spectacles of shame in *Jane Eyre* to stage intimate relations of difference among characters, between present and past selves and, in a more formal sense, between experience and narration, and reader and text.

I conclude with a coda that explores how the rise of sensation fiction in the second half of the century revives cultural concerns about emotional identification as a feminized, physical and emotional vulnerability, and how shame, as with earlier concerns about sensibility, sentimentality, and sympathy, provides a novelistic alternative to overpowering sensation. George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), a fin-de-siècle successor of the 1860s sensation novel, emerges from this cultural debate around sensationalism as a particularly concrete example of how continuing anxieties over the novel's commodified mass production of literary sensation intersect with aestheticism at the century's end and manifest themselves in characters sensationally split through shame. *Trilby*'s hypnotic vocal performances—skillfully manipulated by Svengali to seduce any listener while the hypnotized Trilby herself is evacuated of agency and even consciousness—emblemize a nightmarish specter of direct

emotional transmission through a spectacularly exposed female that both critics of sensationalism and authors seek to address. Shame's role in breaking the hypnotic spell, by guaranteeing Trilby's aesthetic and moral worth, captures the lasting novelistic investment in shame as an aesthetic and relational alternative to emotional submission or antisocial alienation at the century's close.

CHAPTER ONE
SHAME AND SENSIBILITY:
JANE AUSTEN AND THE HUMILIATED HEROINE

“AFFECTED INDIFFERENCE, OR MOMENTARY SHAME”

“Ought sensibility to be cherished or repressed?” This question, starkly framed as the title of an October 1796 *Monthly Magazine* article, reflects a widespread sense at the end of the eighteenth century that the “cult of sensibility” was becoming increasingly embarrassing. “There was a time,” the unsigned article declares, “when sensibility was taken under the patronage of that powerful arbiter of manners—fashion. Then, height of breeding was measured by delicacy of feeling, and no fine lady, or gentleman, was ashamed to be seen sighing over a pathetic story, or weeping at a deep-wrought tragedy.”¹ Wielding shame against an excessive “degree of softness, that soon became ridiculous,” the article sharpens the sense that extreme sensibility is an extravagance whose time has passed.² This use of shame echoes that of even novelists like Ann Radcliffe, who, though she might seem to have an irrepressible flair for emotional indulgence, also pits shame against sensibility. In a speech on the “dangers of sensibility” in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a wise father warns his daughter, about to embark on sensational gothic adventures, “Sentiment is a disgrace, instead of an ornament, unless it lead us to good actions.”³ According to this cautionary lecture, sensibility’s potential disgrace stems from its “dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance” so that “we become the victim of our feelings,

¹ “Question: Ought Sensibility to be Cherished or Repressed?” *The Monthly Magazine* 2 (October 1796): 706. For a useful contextualization of this article in relation to debates on sensibility in the popular press, novels, and other discourses, see Markman Ellis’s “Sensibility, History and the Novel” in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

² “Question: Ought Sensibility to be Cherished or Repressed?” 706.

³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 80.

unless we can in some degree command them.”⁴ Yet such a warning is significantly tempered by the equally pressing need to avoid callous overcorrection: “I would not teach you to become insensible, if I could; I would only warn you of the evils of susceptibility, and point out how you may avoid them.”⁵ The *Monthly Magazine* similarly brandishes shame against *both* sensibility’s “ridiculous” excesses and the “contrary extreme of affected insensibility,” a “freezing air of indifference” constituting “a rude and vulgar kind of stoicism, of which Zeno would have been ashamed.”⁶ Affective indulgence or “affected insensibility”—either, it would seem, invariably leads to shame.

Such was the general mood as Jane Austen drafted early versions of *Northanger Abbey* and other of her major works. Faced with the perilous extremes of a sensibility culturally degraded as feminized irrationality and passive susceptibility, and an insensibility cast as frigid and austere, Austen also engages shame. She invokes shame, however, not just to broach but to reframe the question of whether sensibility “ought . . . to be cherished or repressed.” Across her novels, Austen fashions shame as a valuable mediator between sentimental absorption and what she terms, in *Northanger Abbey*, “affected indifference.”⁷ Rather than repress or disavow sensibility in order to avoid its shame, Austen revises the emotional intensities and investments of sensibility *through* shame, and especially through innovative novelistic displays of shame. By attending to shame’s revisionary, mediating role in *Northanger Abbey*, we can trace the productive possibilities of shame that Austen draws out of the novels of contemporaries like Frances Burney and predecessors such as Samuel Richardson and develops in her own body of work. In what follows, I consider

⁴ Ibid., 79-80.

⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶ “Question: Ought Sensibility to be Cherished or Repressed?” 706.

⁷ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (New York: Norton, 2004), 22. Further references will appear in the text.

Austen's representational experiments with shame first in *Northanger Abbey*, and then throughout her career, in order to show how shame functioned as an increasingly important alternative to sensibility in shaping the novel's shifting cultural status and form. And although Austen confronts a historically specific formulation of repressive shame as it comes into contact with sensibility, by reading shame in relation to her negotiations of sensibility I further intend to challenge a common equation of shame and repression in current critical approaches to Austen's work.

In shame, Austen faces an emotion persistently yoked with sensibility, but also the novel, a genre often dismissed as excessively feminine, emotional, and commercial. It is not surprising, then, that she explicitly addresses shame in her famous defense of the novel in *Northanger Abbey*; perhaps more unexpected is that her defense of the novel itself employs shame. Austen's narrator begins this defense with a seemingly firm disavowal of shame, refusing to participate in injurious shaming practices directed at novel writers and readers: "I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding" (22). As the defense of the novel continues, however, Austen stages her own alternative scene of shame. Out of the "common cant" of readers "decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist" ("I am no novel reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that *I* often read novels—It is really very well for a novel") she focuses on a specific female reader (22). Imagining this reader being confronted with the aggressive question "And what are you reading, Miss—?" Austen ventriloquizes, through the "young lady," a reply that gives way to the narrator's own adamant praise of the novel form:

"Oh, it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—"It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, only some work in which the greatest

powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (22-23)

Here Austen gestures at a shame very different from “degrading” or “contemptuous censure,” positioning “momentary shame” as a promising alternative to firm repudiation for a woman caught in the act of absorbed reading, who thus “lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.” One alternative to absorption—“affected indifference”—implies that the posture of indifference to an enthralling novel must be a false pose. The other alternative to absorption—“momentary shame”—is syntactically positioned as the hinge between “affected indifference” and enthusiastic praise of novels like *Cecilia*, *Camilla* or *Belinda*. Momentary shame appears to facilitate a movement between critical distance and impassioned investment, while constituting a movement away from the “contemptuous” shaming that would seek to put the novelist and novel reader in their place. These affective possibilities take shape in a formal movement between the quoted voice of a reading heroine and that of a narrator speaking as a novelist and also exposing herself as a reader—one who appears to have lovingly, closely yet also critically read not just Burney and Edgeworth but numerous gothic and sentimental novelists.

This brief scene of disrupted reading offers a suggestive précis of shame’s function in Austen’s oeuvre, as well as the narrative strategies she develops to tease out shame’s productive elements. Austen introduces a heroine—a “young lady”—who might negotiate the extremes of overwhelming absorption and “affected indifference” through “momentary shame.” Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, as in its defense of the novel, the fraught maneuverings of the “young lady” are explicitly those of a novel reader, and are also linked to those of the novelist. The “young lady” can look up from her book in shame without disdainfully flinging it away, while the

narrator-novelist, it appears, can also reassess the shame of novelistic tradition and convention without breaking all emotional ties to the genre. In her later works, Austen continues to evoke and more subtly signal the heroine's affective possibilities as representative of those of the novelist and the novel reader, experimenting with both the mediating function and the formal features of momentary shame that first arise in *Northanger Abbey's* defense of the novel. The defense articulates a dynamic constellation of affective positions—absorption, “affected indifference” and “momentary shame”—and Austen uses the charged contact of distinct voices to capture shame's potential to mediate among these positions. The defense's voices include the voice of the “common cant” of society (“I am no novel reader”), of the heroine (“Oh! it is only a novel!” and “It is only Cecilia, Camilla, or Belinda;”), and of the narrator (“or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed . . .”). These closely connected yet separate voices bring into relief how Austen often more ambiguously layers disparate vocal strands, while asking the reader to differentiate among them. Rather than silence the “common cant” and its shaming of literary conventions, Austen accentuates it, while enacting the revisionary potential of “momentary shame” by mingling shaming cant with the self-consciously deviating voices of the narrator and the heroine.

Austen's defense of the novel additionally enumerates the qualities of the novel she wishes to celebrate. We might consider its embedded scene of disrupted reading as also a scene of disrupted emotional identification, similar to those we have seen staged by Adam Smith and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in their theorizations of shame. To approach the scene in this manner begins to connect the possibilities Smith and Sedgwick explore in shame's form with the historically specific aims Austen was pursuing as a novelist. As Sedgwick suggests, shame's disruption of strict identification—whether it be with a person, a book, or society more generally—can

still maintain interest; shame thus opens a space of separation and individuation that nonetheless does not require “affected indifference” or contemptuous detachment. As an affective alternative to ideals of sympathetic likeness, shame promotes the novel’s “most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties,” which sensibility’s forms, for Austen, risk effacing. In Austen’s work the “happiest delineation of . . . varieties” depends especially on a “momentary shame” that, by wavering between absorption and detachment, avoids fixing both a stagnant form of shame and an absolute affective rupture. And insofar as interruptions of emotional susceptibility and over-identification can motivate self-conscious critical reflection, shame allows Austen to make claims to “the greatest powers of the mind” on behalf of her heroines, as well as the feminized novelist and novel reader who—especially through the “best chosen language”—mix emotional sensitivities and critical reasoning.

When Austen fleshes out her defense’s skeletal scene of interrupted absorption in *Northanger Abbey*’s larger narrative of Catherine Morland’s constantly frustrated gothic fantasies, a particular kind of absorption comes to the fore in Catherine’s fixation on the lurid remains of women’s suffering. In Bath, Catherine is enraptured by *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and especially by the prospect of “Laurentina’s skeleton” behind “the dreadful black veil!” (26). Such enthusiasm for traces of female pain continues to dominate Catherine’s gothic speculations during her stay at Northanger Abbey, a stay she hopes will unearth “some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun” (96). But each time Catherine breathlessly approaches an expected unveiling—of the “memoirs of the wretched Matilda” or of Mrs. Tilney murdered or essentially buried alive in captivity—another emotive spectacle unfolds instead, as Catherine recognizes her mistake with searing shame (109). Repeatedly substituting the shamed reader for the gothic corpse, *Northanger Abbey* positions the humiliated

heroine as an emotionally compelling centerpiece, one designed to replace the sentimental spectacle of overwhelming female suffering, while still retaining and reworking much of its affective charge. This switch of figures encapsulates a strategy present throughout Austen's work, as she consistently employs shame to confront both the impasses and lingering allure of sensibility.

For Austen, the sentimental corpse serves to condense a number of broad cultural and more specifically literary concerns over not just extravagant sensibility, but an ultimate insensibility that might accompany it. Catherine is attracted to gothic forms of women horrifically fixed in permanent, all-encompassing states of suffering, and her fixation on such prospects is presented as similarly entrapping, an encroaching absorption into an unreflective over-identification with spectacular misery. But the figure of the moribund body, waning from relentlessly constant pain, also suggests that such emotional enclosure might eventually become trite, tired, even affectively deadening. From this perspective, the problems Austen poses through the sensationally victimized body open out from the contemporary context of Radcliffean gothic to a broader troubling of sensibility's literary conventions that harks back to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and its offspring. The looming specter of an expiring (or expired) heroine who consistently fails to materialize in *Northanger Abbey* registers an anxiety over the last gasps of sentimental conventions—conventions that might lose their potent effect through overuse, or that might simply buckle under the weight of a representational mode that demands complete and overwhelming surrender to its effects as the terms of emotional engagement. Austen wields shame not to deliver a final blow to this mode, however, but to reanimate novelistic conventions that she refuses either to preserve morbidly or to bury indifferently. For if absolute absorption and identification is the readerly stance invited by gothic novels and novels of sensibility more generally, shame enables for Austen a distance that

transforms, rather than merely rejects, the affective hold characteristic of such works.

While the morbidly immobilized female body figures the risks of novel reading, and of conventions that might ensnare a reader, it additionally evokes the plight of the novelist in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen explicitly connects the position of the feminized novelist to that of an “injured body” in her defense of the novel, which pleads to fellow novelists: “Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body” (22). Anticipating the replacement of a sentimentally expiring heroine with a shamed one that will dominate the later sequences set in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen here conjures the shamed status of a collective “injured body” for herself and other novelists to harness its affective power. At the same time she carefully distinguishes this self-proclaimed “injured body” from the passively expiring, “groan[ing]” form that the contemptuous reviewers would make of it, through their rhetorical conflation of novelists with an exhausted maternal “press” reproducing “trash.” The imagery of a feminized “injured body,” however, contains a threat that extends beyond the abuses of dismissive reviewers who would do the novelist harm. For even as Austen rejects the reviewers’ invective, she relies on a sentimental cliché for her pathetic appeal—the cliché of besieged, unjustly “injured” femininity that she herself parodically cites many times in *Northanger Abbey*. This collective “injured body” thus flirts with the danger of merging indiscriminately with extant novelistic techniques for producing emotional impact, and of passively reproducing tired forms even in the attempt to prove the true “capacity” and “labour of the novelist.” The moment epitomizes a difficulty that haunts the novel’s narration, as Austen repeatedly attempts self-consciously to acknowledge and critique novelistic clichés without only parodically repeating or rejecting them, and thereby simply recycling or deflating

emotional effects. The heroine-reader's dilemma of extreme absorption or "affected indifference" thus extends to the narrator-novelist as well, who struggles to establish critical distance from the excesses of the literature of sensibility, without severing all emotional connection to the "injured body" of novel history and conventions.

In *Northanger Abbey*, the "injured body" or corpse that suggests interpretive snares for Catherine and stylistic lures for the novelist often takes a specific textual form: the form of the sentimental letter. Henry Tilney's playful narrative of the gothic delights awaiting Catherine at Northanger Abbey, which fuels her frantic investigations upon their arrival, culminates in an overwrought first-person fragment that proclaims, "Oh! thou—whomsoever thou mayst be, into whose hands these memoirs of the wretched Matilda may fall" (109). As Henry's story mimics Radcliffe's techniques, its climax further alludes to a rich tradition of sentimental epistolary novels chronicling the likes of a wretched Clarissa. In this tradition, as in Henry's own story, the emotive letter encapsulates the aims and methods of a literary system of signification—what I will be terming sentimental signification—for modeling and inciting emotional identification, particularly with a heroine's exorbitant pain. After *Northanger Abbey*, the gothic trappings of imprisonments and corpses recede from Austen's narratives, but the letter remains. By attending to these epistolary remains as they appear across Austen's work, we can trace her ongoing negotiations of sensibility—as an emotional mode and a literary style—through narrative innovations that self-consciously revise sentimental epistolary form. As we will see, the scene of shame in Austen is often, also, a scene of reading, and specifically of letter reading. In such scenes Austen establishes affinities with the literature of sensibility, while exploring deviations from sentimental signification and the mode of readerly absorption and identification that it invites. Before turning to such scenes, then, it is useful first to examine some of the injured bodies of

sensibility—Radcliffe’s Adeline, Richardson’s Clarissa, and Burney’s Camilla—which had a strong influence on Austen, in order to delineate more fully the features of sentimental signification that Austen draws on and reacts against and to illuminate the disruptive force of shame taking shape in close relation to sensibility over the eighteenth century. Austen’s displays of shame maintain connections with the tradition of sensibility, but they also respond to the significant role that shame itself plays in the work of influential novelists who were variously invested in sensibility. Considered in this light, Austen’s work helps to establish a central place for shame, as much as sensibility, in the development of the British novel.

“IT IS TIME TO CONQUER THIS IMPETUOUS SENSIBILITY”

Henry Tilney’s conjuring of the “memoirs of the wretched Matilda,” addressed to “Oh! thou—whomsoever thou mayst be,” taps into a staple of gothic fiction; but it also refers to a specific moment in Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) that starkly employs the mechanics of sentimental signification. In Radcliffe’s novel the long-suffering heroine, Adeline, discovers a moldering manuscript by a “wretched writer” that describes his long imprisonment, anticipates his inevitable murder, and pleads, “O! ye, who may hereafter read what I now write, give a tear to my sufferings: I have wept often for the distresses of my fellow creatures!”⁸ The author of this manuscript clearly articulates sentimental designs: to stage a pointed, unambiguous display of an overwhelming emotion (“my sufferings”) that will yield tangible proof (“a tear”) that the emotion is not only recognized, but sympathetically mirrored by another (132). The writer could not ask for a more obedient reader than Adeline, who exclaims, “Your miseries, O injured being! are lamented, where they were endured. *Here*, where you suffered, I weep for your sufferings!” (132). This neat exchange of

⁸ Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 132. Further references will appear in the text.

suffering between an “injured being” and a responsive reader enacts a well-oiled novelistic version of Adam Smith’s rack of sympathy, with Adeline’s verbal response condensing and aligning all of the constitutive features we have identified in Smith’s famous example: the scenario, the signifying body, and the interior emotional content that mutually reinforce strict emotional identification between the sufferer and the witness. In Radcliffe’s version, the “you” who “suffered”—and is seemingly defined by this overwhelming emotional content—is matched by an “I” who “weep[s] for your sufferings” and provides a body that amplifies the scene’s emotional symmetry.

The insistent deictic “*Here*” that begins Adeline’s statement points to additional signifying elements that reinforce such a receptive response to the spectacle of pain: “*Here*” refers to the claustrophobic prison cell that held the suffering body in place, ensuring that it would have no end other than that of a pathetically, unjustly murdered corpse. Like Smith’s rack, the dank cell provides a hyperbolically constricted and uncluttered scenario that virtually guarantees intense pain as the prisoner’s interior emotional response, and literally fixes the body as the transparent, poignant signifier of the unadulterated misery a sympathetic spectator will replicate in her own transparently emotive body. Adeline’s plaintive “*Here*” thus designates an intricate representational structure that works to close gaps between the scenario of suffering, the signifying body, and interior emotional content, and also between the sufferer and the identifying witness, ensuring that “*Here, where you suffered, I weep for your sufferings!*”

While Adeline’s “*Here*” evokes a scenario, space, and body of unequivocal pain, it also accumulates another significant referent, that of the manuscript itself. After reading the prisoner’s plea for “a tear,” and before offering her vocalized assurance of it, “Adeline paused. Here the wretched writer appealed directly to her heart” (132). This moment’s pause supplements the “*Here*” of the cell’s spatial

structure with the “Here” of the writer’s manuscript, and in the slippage from “*Here*” to “Here” links Adeline’s emotional susceptibility and mimetic tears to a narrative form that “appealed directly to her heart,” highlighting how epistolary narration provides a vehicle particularly suited to the designs and features of sentimental signification. The prisoner’s manuscript functions, as in much of the literature of sensibility, as a material object and a level of narration that each solidify emotional identification. The physical features of the document—its faded and decaying status, conveyed by descriptions and by typographical markers meant to indicate its unreadable passages—make it a textual counterpart to a rotting corpse. The letter especially takes on the role of an additional, transparently signifying body (even something of a replacement), when the prisoner writes, “I will continue my journal nightly, till the hand that writes shall be stopped by death: when the journal ceases, the reader will know I am no more” (133).

Along with the moving materiality infused into the letter, its emotional grasp is enhanced by the form of an “I” directly addressing a “ye, who may hereafter read what I now write.” Much like the scenario of the cell, this first-person voice is uncluttered by other voices muddying the narration. The voice of the single “I” does not waver in its emotional tenor either, sticking to one affective note for the duration of the tale, an unrelenting refrain of constant “misery” and “suffering.” The staged exchange between the “wretched writer” and Adeline also exemplifies the series of mirroring readers often inscribed in sentimental epistolary novels. The prisoner asks his reader not just to share his sufferings, but to mimic his own way of reading pain: “I have wept often for the distresses of my fellow creatures!” In turn, Adeline’s properly responsive reading body, similarly operating simultaneously as a hermeneutic model and an additional spectacle of distress, provides the next link in the chain of emotional equivalence, marking a clear point of entry for the novel reader. Even as the prisoner

casts his manuscript toward any “ye, who may hereafter read what I now write,” the specific form of his address—that of an “I” directly addressing and making specific emotional demands on a “you”—outlines a narrowly delineated space of reception that constitutes true sensibility, both for the letter-reading character and the novel reader.

Radcliffe constructs this adept sentimental exchange late in the eighteenth century, drawing on the preceding refinements of an abundance of sentimental novelists, but also registering her culture’s growing ambivalence over sensibility. Adeline’s deeply inflected “*Here*” thus resounds with the energy of deftly orchestrated sentimental signification, yet further resonates with the anxieties of Radcliffe’s time. The near-seamless call and response of sensibility takes an eerie turn after Adeline firmly announces that “*Here*, where you suffered, I weep for your sufferings!” Adeline then, Radcliffe writes, “started and listened, and thought she heard ‘*Here*’ distinctly repeated by a whisper immediately behind her” (132-33). The errant echo suggests that a fantasy of mimetic emotional connection has been pushed to disorienting extremes: Adeline’s subsequent look at the mirror, with caution “lest some other face than her own should meet her eyes,” further raises the threat of alienation and loss of self where one expects consolatory sentimental contact (134). The voice of the novel’s omniscient narrator, which had briefly given way to the first-person address of the prisoner’s manuscript, reenters the scene along with the unnerving echo, and clarifies its meaning: “[Adeline’s] imagination was now strongly impressed” producing “distempered senses” and a “fancy” that “gradually subdued reason,” the narrator explains (132, 134). The passage’s reverberating “*Here*,” joined with the narrator’s commentary, upsets the sentimental ideal, along with its privileged epistolary narrative form; through it, Radcliffe here articulates concerns that extreme sensibility could involve a dangerous assault on reason and self-assertion.

Especially significant for the consideration of Austen is the form this

articulation takes, as the intrusion of additional voices complicates an idealized symmetry of emotion and address between an epistolary “I” and a responsive “you.” Radcliffe’s disruptive voices, unsettling sentimental signification even as she skillfully deploys it, resemble experiments in narrative voice employed by contemporaries like Burney and Austen to counteract sensibility’s excesses and complicate its popular epistolary form. For Burney and Austen, though, these disruptive voices also come with a specific feeling—the feeling of shame. To help explain such a pairing of form and feeling, we can look to an earlier novel that, unlike Radcliffe’s *Romance*, maintains sentimental epistolary form throughout and takes the form to great emotional (and indeed page) lengths. In *Clarissa* (1747-48), shame strikes a discordant note from within sentimental epistolary form, jarring with the sentimental signification that Richardson so effectively and influentially develops. The shame that grates, in Richardson’s text, against a sensibility very much on the rise in the 1740s—with Pamela and Clarissa the reigning deities of sensibility’s burgeoning “cult”—provides both suggestive roots and an important point of departure for the uses made of shame by Burney and Austen at the century’s end.

While *The Romance of the Forest* offers an exemplary moment of sentimental exchange between Adeline and a “wretched writer,” *Clarissa* is the oft-cited exemplar of the sentimental novel, achieving a potent pairing of sentimental designs and epistolary narrative form. Epistolary exchange gives Richardson a prime vehicle for sentimental signification; Clarissa Harlowe’s “tragical story” consists of an unrelenting accumulation of oppressive scenarios and emotive posturings of a body that weeps, faints, declines, and eventually dies—and also writes letters that both convey and further materialize her corporeal displays of unmitigated suffering.⁹ As

⁹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 1163. Further references will appear in the text.

Clarissa's pen swerves mid-sentence from weakness or her tears hit the page, her letters, written at the moment of intense emotional experience, reflect her body's highly legible signification of overwhelming interior pain. The epistles that help close any gaps between the scenarios and signifying body of pain also work to reduce the emotional distance and difference of anyone reading Clarissa's pain: within the plot, the multiple correspondents exhibit a sequence of replicated relations, in which the addressed "you" is in turn fleshed out as an "I" whose own responsive body and responding letters further model the demands of sensibility for the novel reader. In addition, Clarissa's correspondents fall into two starkly opposed groups: those with proper sentiment, who recognize and replicate Clarissa's intense misery, and those with a callous insensibility, like Robert Lovelace and Clarissa's family, who refuse to admit or to identify with Clarissa's extravagant suffering. Richardson brings together horrific plot points, representations of the transparently emotive body, and epistolary narration to fashion Clarissa as a moving sentimental spectacle of suffering, one that requires strict identification with her displayed pain as the terms of a feeling response. But as easy, and accurate, as it is to view Clarissa as a paradigm of sentimental suffering, it is also useful to conceive of her as constituting two affecting spectacles in the novel—that of suffering and of shame. Each involves a different configuration of signifying elements, each maintains a distinct relation to the epistolary narrative form, and each is differently positioned, by Richardson, as accommodating or frustrating feminine authority and agency.

For much of the novel, Clarissa acts and writes to embody a suffering that she adamantly claims as her own and proffers for others' recognition. Alongside this suffering, however, she is confronted by a shame that, though she refuses to accept it, she cannot help but acknowledge. We have seen in our discussions of shame's form, especially as it takes shape in the theories of Sedgwick and Smith, the productive

possibilities of a compelling form that can provoke mutual recognition of a shameful scenario, even as the spectators and the ostensibly shamed individual refuse to fully own the circulating shame. Richardson's depiction of Clarissa's trials presents a harrowing version of such a tension between the appearance and experience of shame. When forced into becoming a public spectacle of shame through an abduction and rape widely viewed as elopement and seduction, Clarissa finds herself caught between her public shame and personal conviction that it is not deserved. The gaping rupture between scenario and interior emotional content at times violently tears apart her signifying body, as well as her letters. Such violence erupts early in the novel, in Clarissa's response to the curse pronounced by her father on "your wicked, your shameful elopement" that will bring lasting "punishment, both *here* and *hereafter*" (509). Clarissa declares that the "dreadful letter"—conveying her father's curse along with her sister's sweeping condemnation that "Everybody, in short, is ashamed of you"—"has unhinged my whole frame" (510, 513). The "unhinged ... frame" figures the pressure of an exterior, punitive fixing of permanent shame, which weighs on Clarissa throughout the plot even as she maintains her belief of the curse's unjust severity and misapplied demand for her interior shame.

Clarissa's "unhinged ... frame" reaches its breaking point after she is drugged and raped by Lovelace—a time that Lovelace anticipates as one "when her pride of being corporally inviolate is brought down; when she can tell no tales, but when (be her resistance what it will) even her own sex will suspect a yielding in resistance" (879). In focusing on Clarissa's public loss of face—and thus of a morally authorized voice—along with her physical violation, Lovelace predicts the multiple, tangled violations that precipitate an extreme disintegration of body, mind and narrative. While Clarissa returns immediately to her writing, we are told through Lovelace's letters that "what she writes she tears, and throws the paper in fragments under the

table, either as not knowing what she does, or disliking it; then gets up, wrings her hands, weeps, and shifts her seat all round the room: and then returns to her table, sits down, and writes again” (889). A transcription of these fragmentary papers follows, and the fragments convey an “unhinged ... frame” that entails both Clarissa’s disoriented mind—a jumble of “thought, and grief, and confusion, and (Oh my poor head!) I cannot tell what,” she writes—and her sense of a shattered body, which is made most vivid in her story of “a lady” whose supposedly tamed animal “tore her in pieces” (890, 891). Throughout the papers, these dislocations appear especially linked to another painfully perceived disjunction, that between her shameful social status and her actual innocence. The papers insistently conjure a form of shame that Clarissa cannot escape: “How art thou now humbled in the dust, thou proud Clarissa Harlowe!” one paper begins, while another bemoans her fall in others’ esteem, felt acutely as the loss of a public place of “elevation,” that of “applauded purity, to look down from on a prostrate adorer, and an admiring world, and up to pleased and rejoicing parents and relations!” (891, 892). In figuring herself as a “humbled creature,” Clarissa amasses imagery of spoiled surfaces—garments, reputation, skin—that belie her true content: “Yet God knows my heart, I had no culpable intentions!” (891, 892).

Such striking figures of mind and body “unhinged” by the glaring gap between a shameful social appearance and a blameless interiority are amplified by a further unhinging of the epistolary narrative frame that so effectively stages the sentimental spectacle of suffering throughout most of the novel. Clarissa still pens letters—even at a frantic pace—but they are ripped apart, crossed out, undelivered and, for the most part, undeliverable in their cryptic incoherence. The breakdown of the material letter coincides with a breakdown of sentimental address and reception. In the discarded papers, Clarissa’s “I” struggles yet fails to connect with a receptive reading “you” who might understand and share her feelings. In addition, the “I” itself becomes

increasingly unstable throughout the fragments, as first-person self-expression gives way to both the third-person account of “a lady” whose story refracts Clarissa’s own, and the censorious voices that detach from and turn back on the “I” when Clarissa calls herself a “thou now humbled in the dust, thou proud Clarissa Harlowe.”

In the final paper, Paper X, the imagery of ruined surfaces culminates in a particularly explicit, indelible mark of shame, while the “I” most extremely detaches from a single, letter-writing subject. Instead, Paper X contains various, jumbled literary excerpts, littered with indeterminate *Is* and *yous* and scrawled by Clarissa in haphazard fashion (see figure 1). Among these excerpts is a loose quotation from *Hamlet* that especially links the instability of speaker and addressee in Paper X to the stain of shame:

—Oh! you have done an act
That blots the face and blush of modesty;
Takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And makes a blister there!— (893)¹⁰

Veering far from the neat exchange of epistles and emotion that Richardson perfects for sentimental displays of suffering, the cacophony of blurring and ambiguously authored voices in Clarissa’s fractured papers appears better suited to depicting an alienating experience of shame. In particular, torn up letters, fragmentary quotations, and chaotic shifts in voice give material and narrative form to the intense social and self alienation resulting from Clarissa’s “blister[ing]” branding as a shameful spectacle that can be neither ignored, nor effaced, nor accepted as more than skin deep.

¹⁰ Clarissa alludes to an exchange in which Hamlet responds to Gertrude’s question “What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?”:

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there ...

See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* 3.4.40-45.

PAPER X.

LEAD me, where my own Thoughts themselves may lose me,
Where I may doze out what I've left of Life,
Forget myself; and that day's guilt! —
Cruel remembrance!... how shall I appease thee?

—Oh! you have done an act
That blots the face and blush of modesty;
Takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And makes a blister there! —

Then down I laid my head,
Down on cold earth, and for a while was dead;
And my freed Soul to a strange somewhere fled!
Ah! foolish soul! said I,
When back to its cage again I saw it fly,
Fool! to resume her broken chain,
And row the gall-y here again!
Fool! to that body to return,
Where it condemn'd and destin'd is to mourn.

O my Miss Howe! if thou hast friendship, help me,
And speak the words of peace to my divided soul,
That wars within me,
And raises ev'ry sense to my confusion.
I'm tott'ring on the brink
Of peace; and thou art all the hold I've left!
Assist me in the pangs of my affliction!

When honour's lost, 'tis a relief to die:
Death's but a sure retreat from infamy.

Then farewell, youth,
And all the joys that dwell
With youth and life!
And life itself, farewell!

For life can never be sincerely blest.
Heaven punishes the *Bad*, and proves the *Best*.

AFTER all, Belford, I have just skimm'd over these
transcriptions of Dorcas; and I see there is method
and

Death only can be dreadful to the bad:
To innocence 'tis like a beggar dress'd
To frighten children. Pail but off the mask
And he'll appear a friend.

I could a mile unfold
Would barrow up thy soul!...

By foolish misadventures
I have am I afflicted!
Which on each other are
Like waves, run over all

Figure 1. "Paper X," from Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* . . . , vol. 5 (London, 1748), 239.

To portray such shame, Richardson violently disrupts the sentimental signification and epistolary framework that he carefully constructs throughout most of the novel. But rather than pursue this representation of shame, at the height of Clarissa's epistolary disorientation in Paper X the narrative presents the bare blueprint of a "retreat" from shame in another scribbled excerpt:

When honour's lost, 'tis a relief to die,
Death's but a sure retreat from infamy. (893)¹¹

This quotation, from Samuel Garth's *The Dispensary*, contains the glimmer of an

¹¹ From Samuel Garth, *The Dispensary* (London, 1699).

outline of what will follow: Clarissa's drawn-out demise and its aftermath, a narrative conclusion Clarissa's doctor aptly characterizes when he diagnoses "her case to be grief" and that Clarissa herself suitably captures in the observation that "*Death from grief* was, she believed, *the slowest of deaths*" (1075, 1341). Considered in light of Clarissa's disturbing confrontation with the form of shame, epitomized in her fragmentary papers, we can read the notable extremity of Clarissa's suffering and death from "grief" as an aggressive sentimental repairing of the social and signifying ruptures of shame. The painstaking re-configuration of Clarissa as a spectacle of suffering—specifically a "sad sight"—becomes an effort that harnesses not just the formidable energies and signifying strategies of the heroine for the remainder of the novel (up to her death scene and beyond), but also those of the narrative more broadly (895).

In the first letter by Clarissa that is actually delivered to Anna Howe after her rape and her subsequent escape from Lovelace's control, we can see how at odds her particular confrontation with shame is with her sentimental ideal of herself and her intimate relations with others, and with the sentimental signification she uses to support such an ideal. Clarissa struggles to remake her epistolary relation to Anna so that it can accommodate, even alleviate, her excruciating sense of shame. She begins by telling Anna that "Once more have I escaped—but alas! *I*, my *best self*, have not escaped!" (974). To counter the splintering of the self by the oppressive form of shame, Clarissa tries to imagine her letter as a mirroring form that might help repair the damage, even if the letter can no longer reflect back a coherent version of herself consolidated by a mimetically identifying other. Clarissa thus asks her correspondent to "let me, at awful distance, revere my beloved Anna Howe, and in *her* reflect upon what her Clarissa Harlowe once was!"; she then attempts to "shake ... off" the "vile, this hated *self*!" by "inquir[ing] after a *dearer* object, my beloved Anna Howe!—

whose mind, all robed in spotless white, charms and irradiates—but what would I say?—” (974). The abrupt breaking off—on par with the overall “rambling” quality of the letter—suggests the difficulty of bending sentimental epistolary exchange and its structures of strict identification to the pressures of shame (974). Ultimately, however, the letter to Anna falls into two parts: the faltering of “what would I say?” is followed by a concluding section in which Clarissa does pull herself, and her letter, together. Admitting upon “re-perusal” that the first part of the letter has use only as evidence of “a distracted mind,” Clarissa more cogently articulates the purpose of this “wild incoherence” in the letter’s final lines: to ask for a letter in return that “will reach the hands of—*your unhappy*—but that’s not enough— Your miserable CLARISSA HARLOWE” (974). The valediction entails not just the sign of a newfound coherence, but its very source. For this letter, with its final insistence on not just an “*unhappy*” but a “miserable CLARISSA HARLOWE,” encapsulates what is at stake for Clarissa in the cultivation of herself as a “sad sight” and her incessant narration of her “sad story” in the remainder of the plot, as she seeks to reclaim the narrative powers that her relation to shame threatens and to refashion her self-image, public persona, and connections to others in empowering and consolatory sentimental terms that are premised on making herself a spectacle of absolute suffering, rather than a spectacle of shame.¹²

The last part of the novel accordingly charts a self-narration that moves from the undelivered and incoherent scraps of an externally inflicted shame to Clarissa’s final word on (and because of) her suffering. Clarissa seems to will herself into becoming a corpse, a signifying body that she repeatedly glosses as the material proof

¹² Among Clarissa’s many invocations of such phrases is her insistence to Belford that “you were not a stranger to my sad story,” which he recounts in a letter to Lovelace (1076). Others reiterate this phrasing when, for example, Mrs. Norton says the Harlowes “*must* one day be acquainted with the sad story” (989) and Mrs. Howe requests “the *particulars at large of your sad story*” (995).

of her overwhelming grief, and whose emotive meaning is further fixed by the various spatial and linguistic structures she constructs to encase it. Moving beyond the shameful ambiguities of residence in a house of ill repute and a debtor's prison, and those that continue to plague her in a private apartment (and even simply in a mobile body), Clarissa settles finally for the unequivocal pathos of being contained as a corpse in her coffin. This structure, along with the prolific writing that anticipates, reinforces and even decorates it, enables Clarissa to realign her body, scenario, and social position to fit what she feels, and to reconnect with others who must now accurately, wholeheartedly identify with her suffering. In a letter to Anna, for example, Clarissa counters her public shame with the space of suffering: "But since my character *before* the capital enormity was lost in the eyes of the world; and that from the very hour I left my father's house; and since all my own hopes of worldly happiness are entirely over; let me slide quietly into my grave" (1013). The grave erases shame by "shut[ting] up all my sorrows," much like her coffin, as well as her will and posthumously delivered letters to family and friends (1013). Clarissa's last letters endlessly renarrate, in order to eradicate, the possibility of shame around her "fall" through a simultaneous invocation of her present pain: in the posthumous letter to her mother, she transforms herself from one who writes as "a self-convicted criminal supplicating to her offended judge for mercy and pardon" to one who is "purified by sufferings" (1372, 1373). And in the letter to her sister, Clarissa produces redemption and even happiness out of the unchanging signification of her deathly "NOW": she is one who has left behind "error," "And who NOW, made perfect (as she hopes) through her sufferings, styles herself, The happy CLARISSA HARLOWE" (1374, 1375).

As Clarissa falls into disorienting social and linguistic forms of shame, ultimately to regain an important measure of control over and through her "sad story,"

Richardson experiments with two highly effective modes of staging an emotionally compelling narrative spectacle. For Clarissa, shame destructively assaults agency, reason, eloquence and her oft-noted epistolary craft, while suffering becomes the affective material for reconstituting a sense of coherence within the self and power over how that self is read by others. Shame and suffering entail radically different consequences for the heroine with implications for the novelist as well: the representation of Clarissa's shame pushes the epistolary narration toward a level of formal chaos that Richardson mines for effect but finally retreats from, favoring in the end a sentimental form calculated not just to elicit but precisely to define the reader's emotional response.

Austen's own experiments with narrating shame can be read against Richardson's engagement with shame, as much as with sensibility. But Austen enacts a reversal, of sorts, of the relation Richardson establishes between shameful and sentimental signification, a reversal that draws on Frances Burney's revaluing of shame as corrective of, rather than a justification for, extreme sensibility. Burney's reworking of a specifically Richardsonian sensibility through shame is most explicit in the climax of *Camilla*. Published in 1796, *Camilla*, like Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*, reflects the shifting attitudes of the century's end by focusing on the irrational emotional extravagance that can accompany a young heroine's acute sensibility. As in Radcliffe's work, such a troubling of sensibility involves an influx of voices that upsets sentimental signification, but for Burney these voices are specifically linked, much like they are in *Clarissa*, to the experience of intense shame. With its third-person narration and experimentation with free indirect discourse, *Camilla* seems poised to revisit and revise the epistolary narrative form that Burney herself successfully employed in *Evelina* (1778), and in so doing the novel constitutes a pointed response to the form and attendant feelings of *Clarissa*.

Critics such as Miranda J. Burgess have noted that “*Camilla* climaxes in an embedded parody of the death scenes in *Clarissa*,” arguing that when the novel’s eponymous heroine, Camilla Tyrold, ensconces herself in a lonely inn, works herself up into a sickly state, and pens heartfelt letters to be delivered after her death, “Burney stringently ironizes the excessive self-sacrifice Camilla has learnt from earlier romances and conduct books.”¹³ Burney’s engagement with *Clarissa* can be further elucidated if we consider how Camilla’s sentimental crisis is similarly ushered in by a particular experience of shame. Much of the novel’s plot is devoted to honest mistakes—especially in financial and flirtatious matters—that make Camilla vulnerable to misunderstandings and to undeserved, exaggerated and in her view indelible public shame. The scene in which Camilla breaks off her engagement with the tirelessly suspicious Edgar Mandlebert best captures this consistent assault of unjustly inflicted yet undeniable shame: after insisting that “I am lessened in your esteem,” Camilla finds “[s]he could not go on; imperious shame took possession of her voice, crimsoned her very forehead, blushed even in her eyes, demolished her strained energy, and enfeebled her genuine spirit.”¹⁴ Like *Clarissa*, Camilla is plagued not only by the external imposition of unwarranted dishonor on her “genuine spirit,” but also by the belief that intimacy with others cannot sustain the stress of even the false appearance of shame. Distrusting that love can withstand apparent debasement, Camilla sees a permanent break from Edgar as the necessary result of “imperious shame”: “I know ... that appearances have often cruelly misrepresented me; my errors you might have the candour to forget, and false appearances I could easily clear in my own favour—but where, and what is the talisman which can erase from

¹³ Miranda J. Burgess, *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order, 1740-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 95.

¹⁴ Frances Burney, *Camilla, or A Picture of Youth* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 640-41. Further references will appear in the text.

my own remembrance that you have thought me unworthy?" (641).

The "talisman" that Camilla eventually invokes is the spectacle of her suffering, which she grasps with rising desperation when her accumulating debts gain publicity and land her father in prison. Discovering herself ever deeper in explainable "errors" that on the surface must cast her as a "guilty ... perhaps reprobated daughter!" Camilla declares of her father's imprisonment, "What rests thus upon my mind ... is the disgrace—and the cause! the one so public, the other so clandestine!" (830-31). The immense weight of the shameful scenario at odds with her honorable intentions presses on Camilla's body and language along with her mind: "Her reason felt the shock as forcibly as her heart," producing "[w]ords of alarming incoherency [that] proclaimed the danger menacing her intellects, while agonies nearly convulsive distorted her features, and writhed her form" (824). The price of such public disgrace increasingly appears to her a sentimental sacrifice that, like Clarissa's, will be conveyed through poignant letters and guaranteed by her declining body and anticipated corpse. Instead of returning home and clarifying matters, Camilla isolates herself in a nearby inn and writes progressively despondent letters that undertake to repair her tarnished reputation, damaged sense of her self, and broken relations with loved ones by staging her thoroughgoing misery. In a letter to her sister, Camilla describes being "[e]ncompassed with all of guilt with which imprudence could ensnare me," and tries to push back by proffering "this small and humble memorial of my unhappy existence" (845). A chapter appropriately titled "A Spectacle" depicts Camilla frantically fashioning her expiring body as a further "memorial" of suffering that will clinch the pathos of her epistolary appeals. She sends letters to her parents that she believes will "bring them too late"; accordingly, "I ask not now your forgiveness; I know I shall possess it fully," a possession ensured by "the early ashes of your erring, but adoring daughter" (869). The postscript "*Not to be delivered till I*

am dead” similarly secures the results of a letter to Edgar asking that “in this last farewell be all displeasure forgotten!” (870).

If the breaking point of Clarissa’s shame is her disordered, undelivered papers, then Camilla’s is surely “A Vision,” the chapter following “A Spectacle.” Paraphrase cannot do full justice to the bizarre intensity of this multipage vision, in which nightmarish content—the approach and demands of Death—is rendered in a sensational flurry of bodies, voices, pages, pens, and fiery, floating characters that express intermingling sensibility and shame. In some respects, Camilla’s vision shows remarkable continuity with *Clarissa*’s epistolary spectacles of shame. Oppressed by the mistaken notion that her family is ignoring her letters, Camilla falls into a “slumber, feverish nearly to delirium” and dreams that Death appears with a “visible figure” and a “hand, sharp and forked” (874). Death’s literal grasp quickly gives way to a more menacing threat, however, of unmoored, accusatory voices that evoke the shaming chorus of public opinion as they berate Camilla for courting death and demand she justify her moral worth. The assault culminates in a “terrible” voice that ushers in the “Records of Eternity”:

“Prematurely,” it cried, “thou art come, uncalled, unbidden; thy task unfulfilled, thy peace unearned. Follow, follow me! the Records of Eternity are opened. Come! write with thy own hand thy claims, thy merits to mercy!” A repelling self-accusation instantaneously overwhelmed her. “O, no! no! no!” she exclaimed, “let me not sign my own miserable insufficiency!” (875)

Camilla futilely resists, finding herself compelled “involuntarily” to write “guilty characters” in the “immense volumes of Eternity” (875).

Like Clarissa’s fragmented papers, the “Records of Eternity”—in which Camilla fears to “sign my own miserable insufficiency”—appear to approximate epistolary form the better to stage a spectacular breakdown of sentimental self-possession and address. But, as we have seen in *Clarissa*, the epistolary machinery that can poignantly materialize shame’s disorienting form can also fortify a defense

against it. By the logic of sentimental convention Camilla is poised, after writing her “guilty characters,” to pull herself together and reclaim control through a purposeful signing of her misery. Such an opportunity is emphasized when a voice observes, “These are thy deserts; write now thy claims”; however, Camilla struggles against the chance to stake her “claims” on her corpse with even greater desperation, still to no avail:

In vain again she called;—pleaded, knelt, wept in vain. The time, she found, was past; she had slighted it while in her power; it would return to her no more; and a thousand voices at once, with awful vibration, answered aloud to every prayer, “Death was thy own desire!” Again, unlicensed by her will, her hand seized the iron instrument. The book was open that demanded her claims. She wrote with difficulty . . . but saw that her pen made no mark! She looked upon the page, when she thought she had finished, . . . but the paper was blank! . . . Voices then, by hundreds, by thousands, by millions, from side to side, above, below, around, called out, echoed and re-echoed, “Turn over, turn over . . . and read thy eternal doom!” In the same instant, the leaf, untouched, burst open . . . and . . . she awoke. (875-76, ellipses in original)

While the “immense volumes of Eternity” requiring Camilla’s first-person account evoke the epistolary conventions of sensibility, a glaring blank here takes the place of the expected sentimental conclusion. This blank page suggests a narrative refusal of various incarnations of sentimental closure. It erases the sentimental corpse as the novel’s centerpiece and key to resolution; but it also withholds the enclosing of the injured body in a unified first-person voice that fixes signification by conveying one emotion in a direct appeal for identification. The “awful vibration” of multiplying voices—chiming “Death was thy own desire!”—resembles Radcliffe’s eerily echoing “Here,” an unnerving feedback to sentimental signification symptomatic of sensibility gone wrong.

The vision’s sensational proliferation of voices thus follows *Clarissa* in highlighting the oppressive aspects of shame, and *The Romance of the Forest* in stressing a self-destructive valence of sensibility. But the dream’s abrupt ending suggests a further function, as the multiplying voices accentuate the horrific blank

while also filling it in with a vivifying energy that jolts Camilla awake and grants a reprieve from death and “eternal doom.” The vision as a whole, much like these voices, is both deeply disturbing and strangely reanimating. A breaking point of Camilla’s shame and sensibility, it is also a turning point in the plot, ushering in a happy ending of reunited couples and families. Upon awakening, Camilla realizes that while “only a vision ... I cannot shake it off,” and soon after she begins to receive letters, contact others, and find that “Something, nevertheless, like internal revival, once more, to her own unspeakable amazement, began fluttering at her breast” (876, 878). An early sign of revival is the impact of a letter from Edgar that, “dead as she thought herself to the world, its views, its hopes, its cares, passed straight to her heart—that wonderful repository of successive emotions, whence the expulsion of one species of interest but makes way for the entrance of another” (878). Camilla appears saved by her “wonderful repository of successive emotions,” and it is a specific succession of emotions, of exorbitant sensibility followed by responding shame, that proves especially stimulating for the heroine. In the closing scenes in which Camilla finally faces her parents and then reinstates her engagement to Edgar, a palpable shame resparks “interest,” neither producing the permanent rupture from others that she dreads, nor requiring a counteracting spectacle of her suffering and death. By the novel’s end, a more productive side of shame emerges that can negotiate the impositions of “imperious shame” and the problem of what Mrs. Tyrold terms, at one point, “impetuous sensibility” (883). If we look more closely at Camilla’s vision, we can see a pivotal site of this transformation, a space of both “internal revival” and self-conscious formal reinvention. With its conspicuous blank framed by equally vivid voices, the vision itself provides a “wonderful repository of successive emotions” through which Burney explores the possibilities of shame directed against sensibility to enact not a pure rejection—or erasure—of sentimental conventions, but a revision

of them. And the peculiar structure of voices in the vision—beyond being simply symptomatic of oppressive shame or excessive sensibility—contributes significantly to the production of a reanimating strand of shame.

The particular capacity of shame to revive a “species of interest” within Camilla’s “wonderful repository of successive emotions” suggests Philip Fisher’s theorization of shame as a “successor passion.”¹⁵ In his account of the passions, Fisher sets shame apart from the “radical singularity” that characterizes the vehement states of other passions such as anger, fear, grief, and wonder (53), identifying shame as a “successor passion” or the “aftermath of an impassioned state” that provides “a limit to the extreme and extrasocial individualism characteristic of the passions” (65). For Fisher, passions as varied as grief and wonder share the “structural fact of indifference to others and our conspicuous withdrawal into a closed world of self-concern” because each enacts, in its vehement state, the “power of the passions to extinguish the reality and claims of others while creating ... an almost painfully pressing awareness of the self” (67, 60). The frequent “successor passion” of shame is unique in its “repairing of reciprocity,” since “the very premise of shame is the acute feeling of the reality of others and of their opinions” (69, 60). Fisher describes shame as “a telling revelation to others that reciprocity had ceased to exist in our eyes” (68).

Fisher’s figure of shame as a “telling revelation” is itself telling, suggesting how shame’s relational possibilities might take shape as an embodied spectacle integrated into narrative form. Indeed, Fisher imagines shame as a particular kind of moment in the narrative of an individual’s socialization. The passions, for Fisher, offer attractive potential to radically disrupt the modern socialization of the individual “within a more and more universalized and pervasive social existence” (63). But if

¹⁵ Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 65. Further references will appear in the text.

most impassioned states enable “a process that goes in the opposite direction” of modern socialization by “breaking the hold of the world, including the social world, [and] educating each of us about our extrasocial being,” shame instigates the individual’s move back toward socialization without disappearing into it (61-62). While the other passions entail a “moment of pure present time [that] stands uninflected and uncompromised by any secondary feeling for claims of other times past or future in which, under other circumstances, we might imagine our identity invested,” shame, in contrast, integrates this “pure present time” into a narrative sequence—one involving a secondary, reflective moment—that constitutes “social consciousness” (61, 62). “The feeling of shame,” Fisher writes, “occurs in the moment of becoming aware of others, the moment of a return to social consciousness in which, after a time in which it was forgotten, we remember how we look at this moment to those around us who are observers of our condition” (67). Such social consciousness differs, however, from absolute, “universalized” socialization in its structure of enhanced memory: the moment of shame does not forget the previous moment, but instead contains, even derives its intensity from a time “in which [social consciousness] was forgotten.” Shame remembers the social, but also the possibility and experience of forgetting it. Shame is thus distinctively positioned as a mediating “moment,” one that draws on the resources of both radical singularity and extreme socialization, without being reducible to either.

For Fisher the passions are not just “moment[s]” in a social narrative but insistently embodied spectacles that establish the individual’s stance toward others. The passions, excepting shame, are spectacles of radical singularity that entail both a unity of being—as a passion “saturate[s] the body as a whole and the soul or psyche as a whole”—and the solitude of disregard for anyone else (54). With such “totality of the self” comes a striking transparency, as the passion’s “capacity to override any

division between inner states of feeling and outward expression” produces “an almost theatrical visibility to any and all who happen to be nearby” (54, 59, 58).

Significantly, though, this visibility “does not amount to a dramatization, a display, or an appeal to any possible bystanders” but rather a sign of extreme self-absorption (56).

The transparency of these passions thus has “a fixed or immobile quality, a stubborn undiscussable intensity” that marks “the minimal or fragile connectedness ... of our own inner life to the fact and reality of the lives and claims of others” (67-68). Shame,

however, has the potential to transform the absolute and unaware exposure of the

passions into a “telling revelation” that still preserves, yet revises, the passions’ spectacular qualities, reworking them into a self-conscious performance of restored reciprocity. As Fisher notes, “Shame rebuilds the reality of other persons, not by means of reasoned reflection, but through the agency of a successor passion” (65).

Such impassioned “agency” is set in contrast to those passions “that in their rashness and self-absorption forget about others entirely and, as a result, fail to control the selective publication of experience” (57). Fisher does not give a detailed description

of what such a display of shame might look like. But when considered against the “stubborn undiscussable intensity” he attributes to the other passions, Fisher’s figure of shame’s “telling revelation” provocatively evokes the alternate form of an

emotional spectacle that could combine the material impact of intense emotional exposure with the active “agency” and acknowledgement of “claims of others” that are

implied by “telling.” Described as “a shame directed at the evidence we come to

remember later as a telling revelation to others that reciprocity had ceased to exist in our eyes,” such shame appears a material spectacle of accumulated effects, one that

weaves the riveting exhibition of unchecked, transparently embodied extrasocial

passion into a compelling spectacle that manages both to display and contain, to show and tell (68).

Camilla portrays sensibility as a dangerous proclivity for emotional indulgence that could use the check of such a “telling revelation” of shame. Mrs. Tyrold most forcefully articulates the novel’s critique of sensibility, and the need for some restraint, when she finds her daughter alone at the inn and weak from self-induced illness: “Repress, repress ... these strong feelings, uselessly torturing to us both,” she exhorts in exasperation (881-82). Her further admonitions succinctly capture the bind of sensibility understood as “strong feelings” that both create a woman’s particular charm and threaten to overwhelm and even efface her: “O Camilla! ... with a soul of feeling like yours,—strong, tender, generous, and but too much alive, how is it that you thus have forgotten the first ties of your duty, and your heart, and have been wrought upon by your sorrows to forget the sorrows you inflict? Why have you thus fled us? thus abandoned yourself to destruction?” (882). The strength of feeling that constitutes the heroine’s mettle and vitality also harbors a “destruction” and “abandon[ment]” of the rational self, such that Mrs. Tyrold must insist “it is time to conquer this impetuous sensibility, which already, in its effects, has nearly broken all our hearts” (882). Mrs. Tyrold’s lecture reinforces Camilla’s own earlier pangs of conscience over her unruly imagination, which cast her sensibility as unreflective submission to a “faulty ... desire” for emotional extravagance that involves not just “self-neglect” but also the “wholly selfish” wish to become a “self-devoted corpse” (872, 873). In both scenes, sensibility’s risks include the loss of the reasoning self in self-indulgent excess *and* the imposition of oneself onto others in a “selfish” demand for emotional connection contingent on absolute, shared pain. As Camilla’s conscience admonishes her, “will no worthier wish occur to thee, than to leave [your family] to its sorrows and distress,” anticipating her mother’s harsher rebuke of her thoroughgoing self-involvement: “how is it that you ... have been wrought upon by your own sorrows to forget the sorrows you inflict?” (872, 882).

Shame's "telling revelation"—with the relational and representational registers that I have teased out of Fisher's discussion—offers a suggestive lens for reviewing Camilla's vision, focusing on how it addresses the excesses of sensibility not just through shame, but by voicing shame in a particular narrative form. For the vision starts with standard sentimental fare as Camilla imagines her corpse coalescing in graphic detail upon Death's approach: "Every vein was congealed; every stiffened limb stretched to its full length, was hard as marble" (874). The vision soon forgoes such a display, however, in favor of an exchange of voices that have their own visceral immediacy, yet rework key features of sentimental signification. Rather than pursue the sentimental ideal of a unified emotional spectacle Burney unravels the consistency of her heroine's voice and mingles Camilla's utterances with two other distinct voices: the voice of what we might term, borrowing the phrase from Austen, the "common cant" and the voice of the omniscient narrator. In bringing these voices together, Burney conveys the threat of shame's self-effacement but also the possibilities of its impassioned agency and reinvigorated relationality.

When the vision first moves away from the spectacle of Camilla's "congeal[ing]" corpse, it seems to settle on an equally conventional sentimental prospect, that of a suffering heroine compelled to give a first-person account of her inevitable demise. The physical pressure of Death's hand on Camilla's breast transforms into a verbal coercion of her self-narration:

[A] voice hollow, deep, and distant, dreadfully pierced her ear, calling out: "Thou hast but thy own wish! Rejoice, thou murmurer, for thou diest!" Clearer, shriller, another voice quick vibrated in the air: "Whither thou goest," it cried, "and whence comest thou?"

A voice from within, over which she thought she had no controul, though it seemed issuing from her vitals, low, hoarse, and tremulous, answered, "Whither I go, let me rest! Whence I come from let me not look back! Those who gave me birth, I have deserted; my life, my vital powers I have rejected." (874-75)

As the vision progresses, such stark expressions of Camilla's personal feeling continue, but the types of feeling expressed begin to waver. When additional voices—especially one “so near, so loud, so terrible”—next insist that Camilla not speak but write her self-account in the “Records of Eternity,” she is thrust into a position even more reminiscent of the epistolary mode; Camilla's adamant, sentimental declarations of pain and necessary death give way, however, to a burgeoning shame, one now directed at the very extravagance of her sensibility:

A force unseen, yet irresistible, impelled her forward. She saw the immense volumes of Eternity, and her own hand involuntarily grasped a pen of iron, and with a velocity uncontrollable wrote these words: “Without resignation, I have prayed for death: from impatience of displeasure, I have desired annihilation: to dry my own eyes, I have left . . . pitiless, selfish, unnatural! . . . a Father the most indulgent, a Mother almost idolizing, to weep out their's!” Her head would have sunk upon the guilty characters; but her eyelids refused to close, and kept them glaring before her. They became illuminated with burning sulphur. She looked another way; but they partook of the same motion; she cast her eyes upwards, but she saw the characters still; she turned from side to side; but they were always her object. (875, ellipses in original)

Rather than sound one affective note as the essence of her heroine's agency and coherence, Burney shows the utterances of Camilla's “I” literally breaking into discrete, disparate affective strands as she responds to the varied demands of the other voices. The “I” is pulled apart, by sentimental standards, but the result ultimately appears less an unfortunate disintegration of the self than a beneficial accumulation of affective stances. For if emotional intensity is what Camilla wishes, her growing shame, replacing a morbid misery, offers a way both to indulge and repress her desire. The self-generated shame of Camilla's “guilty characters” performs a critical realization and effective “repress[ion]” of “strong feelings” that are “uselessly torturing” to herself and others, while still involving their own high emotional pitch as Camilla proclaims herself “pitiless, selfish, unnatural!” In its very extremity, Camilla's statement of shame counteracts the “selfish” and irrational indulgence of her suffering, placing a limit on sensibility that is fuelled by the force of its own “strong

feelings.” While the pressure of externally imposed “imperious shame” harbors a “danger menacing her intellects” and “impetuous sensibility” equally threatens her reason, shame here begins to mix critical capacities with the fervent feeling that Camilla craves, simultaneously quelling and satisfying parts of her “faulty ... desire.”

Camilla’s shifting self-expression, with the productive accumulation of mixed emotions and reflective insights it entails, formally unfolds over the course of the vision through the amassing of separate, quoted statements of the “I”; but the developments of the “I” also take place amid the odd choir of free-floating voices that Burney adds to the scene. The inquiring voices suggest traces of the unjust, “imperious shame” that hounds Camilla, and indeed much of the charge of the vision derives from their eerie incarnation of censorious public opinion. But just as the palpable splintering of Camilla’s voice conveys affective gains, so does the tense push-and-pull between her own utterances and the dictates of others that increasingly seem to be shaping them. By the time Camilla pens her “guilty characters,” the voices have closed in, moving from commands in “a voice hollow, deep, and distant” to a “voice [that] assailed her, so loud, so near, so terrible” and finally “[a] force unseen, yet irresistible” that prods her own writing hand. Yet the content of those “guilty characters” reveals not a self possessed by invasive social forces but an individual remembering the fair claims of others and beginning to repair the damage of emotional self-absorption. In both content and form, the interplay of Camilla’s first-person “characters” and the ambiguously detached voices surrounding them perform a delicate balancing of personal desire and self-definition with the affective sensitivity to the differences and demands of others that shame can enable.

While not nearly so resounding as the booming voices that take Camilla to task or her own vibrant replies, a third voice, that of the narrator, hovers about the vision. The heroine’s voicing of her shame—reverberating off its articulation by others—

keeps her from being frozen in a solipsistic posture of pain; the narrator's presence contributes the additional effect of keeping her shame itself from becoming too fixed. Camilla's "guilty characters" contain a scathing self-condemnation, a "glaring" scenario of shame lent weight through the heroine's own words. Once written, however, these words uncannily lift off the page, while Camilla's head, which "would have sunk upon the guilty characters," instead follows their "illuminated" flickering. If still a gripping sight, such imagery suggests a different order of spectacle than that of the sentimental continuity of scenario, body, page, and voice that transparently relays a heroine's unchanging interior emotion. The loosening of shame that is implied by such a material display—even as Camilla proclaims her guilt—is partly amplified by *what* she is saying: Camilla's self-indictment reveals a dawning enlightenment that works to mitigate her worst faults of reason and desire through her unblinking recognition and statement of them. The extreme expression of her shame thus offers the very means of its dissipation. But the shameful label is further destabilized by *how* Camilla says it: the narrator specifies that "her own hand involuntarily grasped a pen of iron" to write these "guilty characters," giving an involuntary quality to the heroine's utterance that inflects its content, opening a space where Camilla can simultaneously claim and resist her shame. In staging a shame that can be adamantly maintained yet still incompletely accepted by the heroine, Burney deviates from the sentimental model of emotional self-definition premised on the heroine's emphatic ownership and display of her feeling. At the same time, Burney bridges the sharp rupture between an oppressive, permanent scenario of shame and complete interior rejection of it that constitutes the sole relation to disgrace for a heroine like Clarissa. The vision entertains a spectacular form of humiliation with changeable and uncertain content that can allow unlikely self-vindications, as well as strong affective investments in faulty—but not hopelessly fallen—versions of the self

and in others perceived as able to accept, even want, that flawed self. Such possibilities galvanize Camilla's subsequent reconnections with others, best captured when she finally reunites with her estranged fiancé at the novel's end: far from invoking the once-desired "talisman which can erase from my own remembrance that you have thought me unworthy," she now insists they linger together on the delicious detailing of "my imprudencies—my rashness—my so often-erring judgment . . . and so apparently, almost even culpable conduct" (900, ellipses in original).

In *Camilla*, Burney conceives a heroine who is neither irreproachable nor hopelessly ruined, refining a structure of competing, variously condemning and absolving voices that can keep shame present and at play. The self-consciousness with which Camilla's visionary self-examination transpires as an insistent scene of writing suggests that its negotiations between sensibility and shame intersect with a number of tensions prominent in Burney's own craft at this point in her career—between first- and third-person narration, the gothic and realist mode, sensationalism and satirical commentary. Perhaps the most pressing concern for the novelist, though, is simply how to imagine a malleable signifier of shame that could issue from one's own pen: so it would seem in light of Burney's own reflective account of her literary travails in her 1814 preface to *The Wanderer*. In the preface, dedicated to her father, Burney bemoans the negative "force of denomination" of "the term Novel," and the trend for the novel "necessarily, and in its changeless state, to be branded" as shameful, "sunk lowest in literary estimation."¹⁶ The force of such inflexible shame, as Burney recalls, had actually driven her to burn the first novel manuscripts she ever wrote:

So early was I impressed myself with ideas that fastened degradation to this class of composition, that at the age of adolescence, I struggled against the

¹⁶ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 8, 7. Further references will appear in the text.

propensity which, even in childhood, even from the moment I could hold a pen, had impelled me into its toils; and on my fifteenth birth-day, I made so resolute a conquest over an inclination at which I blushed, and that I had always kept secret, that I committed to the flames whatever, up to that moment, I had committed to paper. (8)

Yet such destructive blazes of all-consuming shame are short-lived for the aspiring author: while the sacrificial texts include an epistolary manuscript never to be fully recovered—"the imaginary ashes of Caroline Evelyn, the mother of Evelina"—another rises from the remains: "The passion, however, though resisted, was not annihilated: my bureau was cleared, but my head was not emptied; and, in defiance of every self-effort, Evelina struggled herself into life" (8). Burney's characters manage to "struggle" out of their author's shame, and blushing heroines like Evelina and Camilla in turn model transitory, vivifying encounters with possible "degradation" that reflect back on the novelist's own. Just as Camilla moves past the sentimental fantasy that her death—"the early ashes of your erring, but adoring daughter"—must eradicate her disgrace, Burney embraces her own proximity to shame that does not require the "imaginary ashes" of her literary offspring.

Such an embrace seems partly enabled, in the preface to *The Wanderer*, by redefining the proper stakes and source of the novelist's shame: "If then, even in the season of my youth, I felt ashamed of appearing to be a votary to a species of writing that by you, Sir, liberal as I knew you to be, I thought condemned . . . how much deeper must now be my blush," Burney asks, if she cannot achieve in her novels the kind of moral and aesthetic quality that even "an exterior the most frivolous may enwrap" (8-9). Shifting focus from a novel form "branded" in "its changeless state" to one defined by its content's "execution" and effects, Burney conjures a blush that is both potent and kept at bay, that marks and motivates the marriage of careful craft and emotional nuance she wants to claim for her novels (7). By exposing to her father (and, through the published dedication, to the "alluring, but awful tribunal of the

public”) her ongoing yet refigured sensitivity to shame, Burney presents her own career as an emotional maturation fueled by the fusion of shame and sensibility: “And your fortunate daughter, though past the period of chusing to write, or desiring to read, a merely romantic love-tale, or a story of improbable wonders, may still hope to retain—if she ever possessed it,—the power of interesting the affections, while still awake to them herself, through the many much loved agents of sensibility” (8, 9). Burney’s personal account reveals a cultural climate in which novelists like Austen might feel the weight of “degradation” crushing their desire to publish, but also might find in shame a form of “passion” that could accommodate “resist[ance]” without “annihila[tion]” or—in the terms used by the *Monthly Magazine*—could somehow “repress” and still “cherish” the perceived excesses of sensibility and its novelistic manifestations.

“MOST GRIEVOUSLY WAS SHE HUMBLLED”

The persistent spectacle of the humiliated heroine has troubled Austen scholarship. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggestively articulates part of this trouble, though she does not frame it in relation to shame specifically, when she points out the prevalence of the Austenian spectacle of the “Girl Being Taught a Lesson.”¹⁷ Sedgwick locates the challenges posed by this spectacle partially in the texts themselves—in “the chains of reader relations constructed by the punishing, girl-centered moral pedagogy and erotics of Austen’s novels”—but much more so in the relations that readers have tended to impose on their encounter with the spectacle when accessing it through limiting conceptual frameworks shaped by the repressive hypothesis.¹⁸ Sedgwick sees the limitations of the repressive hypothesis in the eager

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

critical insistence that heroines must repress certain qualities and desires to access mature subjectivity, but also in the “avowedly *antirepressive*” readings that replace the heroine with Austen herself as the “girl” being taught a lesson about her own repression—readings that depend on “the forcible exaction from her manifest text of what can only be the barest confession of a self-pleasuring sexuality.”¹⁹

When critics have specifically addressed the role of shame in the spectacle of the “Girl Being Taught a Lesson,” they have found it particularly hard to see something other than repression. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar exemplify the stance of much feminist criticism by reading a pattern of Austen’s heroines being “mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense” as the “necessary accompaniment of the surrender of self-responsibility and definition.”²⁰ Austen’s shame can only be salvaged, for Gilbert and Gubar, by unearthing an entirely different emotion: a “subversive strain,” lurking beneath this “cover story,” in Austen’s “representations of a series of extremely powerful women each of whom acts out the rebellious anger so successfully repressed by the heroine and the author.”²¹ Others readers refuse to salvage a “cover story” of shame, making it *the* story. Marilyn Butler, for example, rests much of her assertion of Austen’s conservatism on her two plots: on the one hand, the plot of “the Heroine who is Right, [who] acts as a spokesman for conservative orthodoxy”; on the other, that of “the Heroine who is Wrong,” and is righted through “self-discovery and self-abasement” in “the typical moment of *éclaireissement* towards which all the Austen action tends, the moment when a key character abandons her error and humbly submits to objective reality.”²² Susan Fraiman indicts shameful submission with similar vigor, focusing on the humiliation

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), 159, 163.

²¹ Ibid., 112, 169.

²² Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 166, 176.

of Elizabeth Bennet as a disempowering castration that forces her to “largely relinquish” her “intellectual confidence and authority.”²³ In Fraiman’s account, it appears that the steep cost of shame across Austen’s novels can only be countered by the reader’s distanced recognition, at the heroine’s expense, “that the female protagonist’s humiliation, as much as it advances the romantic plot, also comments ironically on this plot and on marriage as a girl’s developmental goal.”²⁴

While some readers seek to temper the seemingly undeniable repression of shame by linking it with subversive anger or ironic distance, Claudia Johnson underscores shame’s acute coercions by yoking it to those she sees in sensibility. In a discussion of Austen’s refusal to capitulate to the oppressive literary conventions and affective investments of sensibility, especially those related to the suffering and demise of a “seduced and abandoned” heroine, Johnson takes pains to defend Austen from critics who would view her as “a cold, nasty, ironic woman,” “emotionally deficient,” with “a shockingly *unladylike* failure of feeling.”²⁵ Johnson asserts that Austen is, rather, performing “a stunning, deadly serious piece of social criticism” in order to disrupt “uncritical acquiescence in the death of ‘lovely woman’” (160). Johnson’s defense resonates with the poles of sentimental absorption and “affected indifference” that Austen negotiates in her own defense of the novel; however, shame, far from offering an alternative affective purchase on the “critical” in Johnson’s analysis, emerges only as an extreme punitive form invoked to expose the less apparent constraints of sensibility, which are “written into [women’s] own bodies, and thus internalized, concealed, and executed from within” (173). For Johnson sensibility is a covert trap—“the affective arena of an ideology oppressive to women”—that

²³ Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ Claudia Johnson, “A ‘Sweet Face as White as Death’: Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility,” *Novel* 22, no. 2 (1989): 160, 159.

shame's more histrionic restraints help bring into view: "Because the body of the seduced maiden afflicts her for her misdeeds, she need not be punished by any other hand, and we need not worry about the inhumanity of the law—the stocks, the stonings, or the carts of shame that dragged prostitutes through the streets" (173). Johnson additionally casts shame, in its more naturalized guises, as an especially toxic component of novelistic disposals of sentimental heroines after their fall, where "the deaths of lovely women—through an act of suicide, or, which amounts to a similar thing, through a mortal or near-mortal superabundance of remorseful feeling—almost always follow this form of disgrace, although death also awaits women of feeling who have been wronged by an unfeeling world in less compromising ways" (160). Positioning "superabundance of remorseful feeling" as sensibility's internal, psychological equivalent to disciplinary "carts of shame," one that just as firmly clinches violent restraints on women's bodies and subjectivities, Johnson argues that Austen properly refuses "to eroticize female inanition" and "to indulge the hankerings of sensibility" (160, 159).

Rather than refuse, evade, or condemn shame, though, Austen cultivates a form of "momentary shame" that is neither continuous with sensibility, nor set in stark opposition to it; instead such shame mediates between problematic extremes of sentimental absorption and "affected indifference" across Austen's oeuvre. If we return, as a case in point, to the recurring humiliations of Catherine Morland when she visits Northanger Abbey, which culminate in her climatic "awaken[ing]" through "humbl[ing]," we can see how shame offers Austen a way to stage an eroticized revision—rather than mere repression—of past errors and indulgences within her heroine's interiority as she undergoes an emotional education. When Catherine encounters Northanger Abbey, her unsuccessful attempts to impose gothic conventions on its architecture, objects and inhabitants involve a movement between

absorbing interest and shame. Catherine repeatedly feels she is approaching the recreation of the affective intensity of gothic novels in the world surrounding her, only to be flustered by the unrelenting banality of her true surroundings—a repeated rebuff that immerses her in shameful realizations of her misguided expectations. One might view this constant shaming as simply a repression of Catherine’s desire to translate her novelistic investments into a heightened way of experiencing the world. But we can better account for shame, here, as an alternative form of affective intensification. Sensations of shame are used by Catherine—and also by Austen—as a valuable way of redirecting attention away from gothic delusions to more accessible sources of strong feeling, not as a means of absolutely suppressing them. For example, Catherine’s keen surveys of her bedroom at Northanger Abbey suggest a sort of interchangeability, or more accurately affinity, in what she seeks—sometimes seeking gothic receptacles of horror, sometimes seeking in those same receptacles a revival of her shameful miscalculations regarding them, and sometimes moving between one motivation and the other.

At the height of Catherine’s humiliation, after being discovered by Henry Tilney in his mother’s room looking for evidence of her murdered or imprisoned body, Catherine’s mental lingering on the experience and its consequences reveals an interplay between the seemingly absolute conclusion of her previous aims and a transformation of them. The chapter that describes Catherine’s ultimate shaming begins with an apparently stark reprimand: “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened” (136). But as the passage continues, Catherine’s humiliating failure to uncover a degraded victim of a villainous husband’s violence morphs into an auto-erotic, self-fashioned spectacle of *her own* extreme shameful exposure. She redirects many of the gothic elements that have entranced her into a hyperbolic perception of “this fatal morning” in which “[h]er folly, which now seemed

even criminal, was all exposed to [Henry], and he must despise her for ever” (136-137). Turning to the passage in its entirety, and tracing the modulations of voice as it progresses, we can see how free indirect discourse, with its layering of voices, contributes to the depiction of a seemingly absolute, punitive “awakening” that becomes the very material of continued pleasures and interpretive confidence:

The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry’s address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry. It was not only with herself that she was sunk—but with Henry. Her folly, which now seemed even criminal, was all exposed to him, and he must despise her for ever. The liberty which her imagination had dared to take with the character of his father, could he ever forgive it? The absurdity of her curiosity and her fears, could they ever be forgotten? She hated herself more than she could express. (136-37)

“The visions of romance were over” appears at first the unambiguous statement of oppressive narrative fact. But the lines that immediately follow register increasingly distinctive features of Catherine’s, rather than the narrator’s, voice. The overwrought inflection of “Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry” seems firmly located in Catherine’s interiority, which, though visions of romance are ostensibly over, seems not to have lost any of its emotive edge. The ambiguity of voice that characterizes free indirect discourse thus creates an ambiguity over who has violently pronounced the “visions” “over,” Catherine or the narrator. Extreme statements of violent ends and complete awakenings oscillate, through the contextual effects of free indirect discourse, between a punitive shaming voiced by the narrator and a shameful reworking of Catherine’s gothic “extravagance” in her own voice. The interpretive demands made by the ambiguity of voice, here, ask the reader to distinguish and straddle these positions, as we are invited both to identify and variously and unstably to *identify with* the shamer and the shamed. Since Catherine herself takes on the roles of shamer and shamed, Austen highlights the kind of

interpretive finesse that can be attributed to the reader in the process of assigning shame, dramatizing how Catherine's own self-shaming involves her in more active forms of interpretive engagement with the novels she has read. Catherine selectively plucks out features of gothic plot, imagery and language, but more appropriately applies them to her specific social context than she has previously been able. She is thus defended against the shame assigned by the cultural stereotype of the irrationally over-emotive female novel reader, but this defense involves, somewhat paradoxically, taking on a shame that asserts her ability selectively and critically to borrow gothic tropes of intense female suffering—an ability the narration itself is also showing off.

Catherine, in effect, picks back up the sentimental letter she had to drop not long before. Austen's own, earlier defense of the novel centers on a "young lady" caught up in her reading who "lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame"; Catherine's explorations of the abbey reenact and round out this tableau when she believes she has unearthed something like the coveted "memoirs of the wretched Matilda" in her bedroom cabinet. The scene of discovery begins with Catherine making a show of "a most happy indifference," which is negated by a "parting glance round the room" that lands on a promising cabinet, and then a "precious manuscript" hidden inside (115, 116). Catherine, in fact, drops this "precious manuscript" twice. The first instance suggests an overwhelming sensibility: when the candle blows out, "Catherine trembled from head to foot," "[a] cold sweat stood on her forehead," and "the manuscript fell from her hand" (117). The second instance indicates a most *unhappy* indifference; when Catherine discovers the now "detestable papers" are actually devoid of any emotionally engaging content, a mere bundle of dry housekeeping records, she accordingly "return[s] them to the same spot within the cabinet, with a very hearty wish that no untoward accident might ever bring them forward again, to disgrace her even with herself" (118). Catherine strains to

renounce her shame as much as perform her indifference when she lays down these disappointingly worthless papers, but her subsequent reveling in her “disgrace,” after being discovered by Henry in his mother’s room, reignites the avidly sought spectacle of a woman who, if not grieving, is “[m]ost grievously . . . humbled.”

If *Northanger Abbey* figuratively revives the discarded sentimental letter through Catherine’s climactic shaming, later novels follow in a more literal strain. Across Austen’s work, the material letter often functions as the sign of a problematic sensibility that the narrative registers, but just cannot let go. As characters resist and reconnect with such letters on shifting affective terms, Austen revises sentimental signification into shameful signification that pursues the possibilities of a specifically “momentary shame.” In Austen’s early novels, shameful signification emerges as a technique of renarrating the sentimental letter into a spectacle of shame that accumulates—and mediates between—other moments of extreme absorption and detachment over the course of the plot. Later works collapse such renarration into an even more immediate “momentary shame” through instances of free indirect discourse that simultaneously stage the form of a coercive, absolute spectacle of shame and loosen any fixed hold of shame, sensibility, or indifference on the heroine, as well as the novelist and novel reader.

In advancing this trajectory of Austen’s work, I treat *Northanger Abbey* as something of a first *and* last novel. Its involved publication and revision history—begun in 1798, posthumously published with *Persuasion* in 1817, and revised to a critically contested extent at various dates along the way—might justify such treatment.²⁶ Rather than make firm claims for the dates and types of revision, though,

²⁶ Narelle Shaw provides a detailed account of *Northanger Abbey*’s publication history and the critical debates over it, and makes a compelling argument for dating substantial revision as late as 1816 in “Free Indirect Speech and Jane Austen’s 1816 Revision of *Northanger Abbey*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 30, no. 4 (1990): 591-601.

I simply wish to emphasize how *Northanger Abbey* highlights a particularly explicit linking of shame to the novelistic conventions of sensibility that becomes more muted as Austen's career continues, while it also gestures at the centrality of free indirect discourse to effects of "momentary shame" more characteristic of Austen's late novels. *Northanger Abbey*'s self-reflexive, innovative spectacles of shame vividly counter the critical commonplace of dismissing shame as repression in Austen's work; they additionally complicate the approach of critics such as D. A. Miller who have insightfully explored a more productive role of shame in Austen's style. For Miller, the great achievement of "Austen Style" is an "anonymous, impersonal, universal narration" that thrives on "catch[ing] . . . out" its characters "in an embarrassing peculiarity from which it is, by its very status, free."²⁷ Miller thus reads Austen's narration as a vital form of shame management—especially of her "failed, or refused, but in any case shameful relation to the conjugal imperative"—but it is a management that relies on eradicating signs of shame in the realm of narration, keeping them firmly fixed to characters who perform the social constraints and inevitable humiliations of personhood, particularly that of a female person (27). *Northanger Abbey* is positioned, in his argument, as a rough patch on the road to a style most perfected in *Emma*: "but even here, where it has not yet attained the full purity of its impersonality, Austen Style is already decidedly *neuter*, as though it were on an exemption from 'sex'—in the old-fashioned sense (appropriate for the epoch) of both gender *and* sexuality—that this impersonality is most crucially founded, developed, secured" (33). What Miller's account leaves out, however, and what *Northanger Abbey* can particularly help to retrieve, is how Austen's narration might eschew most social markers of "Woman," but still persistently announces and affiliates itself with a

²⁷ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 27. Further references will appear in the text.

potentially shameful femininity *in the form itself*. Austen's style, by accentuating its implication in the shame of a culturally feminized novel form, and more particularly that of increasingly denigrated literary conventions of sensibility, consistently reworks while refusing to renounce its "embarrassing peculiarity" of gendered style. Taking *Northanger Abbey* as an exemplary starting point, we can trace in Austen's scenes of shameful letter reading and writing less a *neuter* style than one where narrator and character each insistently inhabit, in order to rehabilitate, forms of feminized shame.

After *Northanger Abbey*, it is *Sense and Sensibility* among Austen's works that most directly raises the question of what place injured bodies and sentimental epistles—and the emotional proclivities that they display and incite—have in the novel. Much like *Camilla*, the narrative of *Sense and Sensibility* appears to be speeding toward a climactic sentimental sacrifice of its heroine, only to stop short at the critical juncture. Prior to her potentially fatal illness, Marianne Dashwood's incarnations of desperate suffering—her poignant letters to Willoughby—yield only a shockingly unsentimental letter in response from her lover. But when the narrative refuses Marianne's next incarnation of pain, the death she invites as her sole consolation, Willoughby finally delivers. As if materializing magically in the void Marianne's incipient recovery leaves at the narrative's affective core, Willoughby suddenly appears, demanding to meet with Elinor immediately after she has been assured of her sister's safety. He presents a moving—and deeply moved—sight, but one that does not quite take the shape a sentimental enthusiast might expect. Arriving quite literally to renarrate both the contents and context of his "impudently cruel" letter in response to Marianne's heartfelt notes, he does so most effectively as a spectacle of shame.²⁸

²⁸ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: Norton, 2002), 130. Further references will appear in the text.

The effectiveness of shameful renarration is foregrounded by the false starts Willoughby makes leading up to it. For as Willoughby attempts to redeem his past behavior by describing his true circumstances to Elinor, his unfeeling response to Marianne's notes takes on different possible forms: first a display of his actual sentimental suffering over her appeals, then a revelation that he was only affecting indifference to Marianne's feelings in his letter. The glaring shortcomings emphasized in both forms—extreme sensibility and exaggerated disengagement—accentuate their problems as affective responses to another's pain, but even more their pitfalls as narrative responses to sentimental convention. The epistolary product of his affected indifference—of what Willoughby calls “fancying myself indifferent” and trying to “affect the air of a cool, common acquaintance”—is especially couched as a specimen of bad writing, and particularly of bad *women's* writing (231). “[W]hat do you think of my wife's style of letter-writing?—delicate—tender—truly feminine—was it not?” he sarcastically asks, revealing to Elinor that his wife produced the entire contents of the letter. “I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to. The original was all her own—her own happy thoughts and gentle diction,” he explains (233). In forging this insensitive pose, devoid of sympathy or shame, Willoughby loses access to authentic self-expression, condemning himself to “servilely copying”; he additionally perpetuates prose that he suggests would be truly deplorable coming from the pen of a woman, insofar as it implies a complete break from any “truly feminine” feeling, “tender[ness],” or “style.”

The remedy for his letter's flagrant absence of feeling, however, is not a mere reinstatement of the sensibility it lacks. For the sentimental display itself appears lacking when, earlier in their conversation, Willoughby tries to convey to Elinor his actual reaction to Marianne's letters, and fumbles to find the right words:

“When the first of her's reached me, (as it immediately did, for I was in town the whole time,) what I felt is—in the common phrase, not to be expressed; in

a more simple one—perhaps too simple to raise any emotion—my feelings were very, very painful.—Every line, every word was—in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid—a dagger to my heart. To know that Marianne was in town was—in the same language—a thunderbolt.—Thunderbolts and daggers!—what a reproof she would have given me! (230)

Here the performance of sensibility, like that of insensibility, courts failure, and on strikingly similar grounds. Willoughby again risks “servilely copying,” in this case sentimental clichés that smack of the inauthentic because simply too conventional, “perhaps too simple to raise any emotion.” His linguistic expression of intense pain suffers from the “common phrase” and “hackneyed metaphor”—concerns that similarly inflect Austen’s refusal to ground her novel’s effects in the worn-out image of a heroine’s grief-stricken corpse. Willoughby claims Marianne would disapprove of his rote usage, but she has shown herself only too ready to embody a sentimental cliché of fatal suffering, revealing a lack of reasoned restraint and also, perhaps worse, a lack of real imagination. Even here, despite Willoughby’s professed tribute to Marianne’s “taste,” it is her desire to produce piercing emotional effects that prove her a “dear writer” and to experience them in turn that seems to lie at the tired “heart” of the matter (230). The source of Willoughby’s impoverished vocabulary is partly its overuse, but also his self-defeating investment in its absolute clarity and impact. Always canny about sentimental convention, Willoughby overcompensates where he was once found wanting, straining now to guarantee his sensibility through his full participation in its strict relational ideal, where any deviation from the epistolary suffering of the “dear writer” or from fully replicating it in his response would be a breach of sentimental decorum. The impetus of complete emotional legibility thus limits him to trite formulations like “my feelings were very, very painful” or variations that also remain too “common” or “too simple to raise any emotion.” In the wake of *Northanger Abbey*, the insufficient letter in *Sense and Sensibility* condenses a similar binary of forced insensibility and indulgent sensibility that might be two sides of the

same counterfeit coin. The starkness of the binary continues to drive Austen's search for a style that could ring true *and* truly feminine, one that would not capitulate too easily to cravings for emotional extravagance or enact an unfeeling withholding that itself constitutes bad social and literary form.

Willoughby struggles for self-expression when adopting sentimental phrases and, even more, when "servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to" into the text of his callous letter. However, when he finally articulates the shame that did not make its way into the original text, transcribing for Elinor what he had really thought about what he was writing, he starts to lay firmer claim to his elusive "I":

"My business was to declare myself a scoundrel, and whether I did it with a bow or a bluster was of little importance.—'I am ruined for ever in their opinion—said I to myself—I am shut out for ever from their society, they already think me an unprincipled fellow, this letter will only make them think me a blackguard one.' Such were my reasonings, as, in a sort of desperate carelessness, I copied my wife's words, and parted with the last relics of Marianne." (233)

In the narration of his intense shame Willoughby defines a self of strong feeling, while also stressing a break in this self's emotional coherence as much as its connection to others. If the phrase "said I to myself" figures one part of this self convincing another that it is really "ruined" and "shut out for ever," the resistant strand ultimately gains enough traction to motivate Willoughby's current appeal to Elinor, an appeal that joins his past conviction of complete ruin to a plea for qualified exoneration: "And now do you pity me, Miss Dashwood?—or have I said all this to no purpose?—Am I—be it only one degree—am I less guilty in your opinion than I was before?—My intentions were not always wrong. Have I explained away any part of my guilt?" (234). Out of the past "I" professing to be resigned to full guilt and alienation comes one who can enact a lingering, incomplete sense of his shame as the means of remembering and reaching out to others. Letting go of some "part of [his] guilt" along with the

sentimental model that invalidates partial or failed displays of overwhelming emotion, Willoughby best achieves his “purpose” by forgoing piercing emotional effects for those of circumscribed and uncertain “degree” and “part[s].” Although Elinor responds with appropriate reservations (“Yes, you have certainly removed something—a little.—You have proved yourself, on the whole, less faulty than I had believed you”), such reserve does not withhold but rather cultivates the “compassionate emotion” that she “betray[s]” even as she insists, “You are very wrong, Mr. Willoughby, very blameable” (234, 233).

When Willoughby shows himself to be “*less* faulty”—neither a paragon of sensibility nor an irredeemable villain—Austen suggests his emotional growth and, even more importantly, provides a counterpart to his sentimental spectacle in danger of falling flat, but also of working too well (234, *italics mine*). That Willoughby’s shame can elicit, from its witnesses, an emotional response mixed with measured distance ultimately appears a greater benefit than any definitive rescue of his character. A too complete absolution of his shame, in fact, presents a potential assault on Elinor’s critical capacities: while Willoughby worries about exhausted sentimental effects, Elinor worries that “his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not in reason to have weight” as she finds that “Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself—to his wishes than to his merits” (236). The possibility that Willoughby’s spectacular pain might incite irrational susceptibility informs Elinor’s subsequent caution when she relates his visit to those more prone to sentimental indulgence:

Had Mrs. Dashwood, like her daughter, heard Willoughby’s story from himself—had she witnessed his distress, and been under the influence of his

countenance and his manner, it is probable that her compassion would have been greater. But it was neither in Elinor's power, nor in her wish, to rouse such feelings in another, by her retailed explanation, as had at first been called forth in herself. (247)

During and immediately after Willoughby's visit, Elinor especially manages her "rouse[d]" feelings and balances compassion with proper judgment by remembering, without fixing, Willoughby's faults. Reflecting after his departure on the moving "circumstances" conveyed by "that person of uncommon attraction," her critical self-assertion particularly unfolds as a tug of war between pity and blame (236): "Willoughby, 'poor Willoughby,' as she now allowed herself to call him, was constantly in her thoughts; she would not but have heard his vindication for the world, and now blamed, now acquitted herself for having judged him so harshly before" (236, 237). "[P]oor Willoughby" and his spectacle of suffering could possibly overtake Elinor's "thoughts," but "now" remain as an "allowed" indulgence offset by the constant wavering in the perceived "degree" of his shame that staves off Elinor's inclinations toward overly harsh or lenient assessments.

Elinor's response to Willoughby's attempted "vindication"—that "now blamed, now acquitted herself for having judged him so harshly before"—helps keep Willoughby from being too fully condemned or easily absolved, but it also raises a secondary register of shame: Elinor's own. Focused more on the blame or acquittal summoned by Elinor's mode of judgment than Willoughby's actions, the prospect of shame that here hangs over either too detached or indulgent interpretation returns, even more directly than in Willoughby's self-narration, to the problems of properly feminine reading and expression. Cast from the novel's start as more the heroine of sense than of sensibility, possessing a "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment," Elinor must also be defended from those who would find such femininity "[c]old-hearted" (8, 18). Marianne gives the most scathing voice to this critique when she responds to Elinor's careful praise of Edward Ferrars: "'Esteem him! Like him!

Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh! worse than cold-hearted! Ashamed of being otherwise””
(18). The novel’s mouthpiece of sensibility conceives of shame as a necessary foe, a powerful instigator of her sister’s affected detachment worse than actually being “cold-hearted.” Far from the force of excessively repressed feeling, however, Elinor’s keen sensitivity to shame—both others’ *and* her own—enables the revival of her interest in cases, like that of Willoughby, where sense and reason might otherwise dictate the suppression of any emotional softening. Functioning as a surrogate reader throughout much of the novel, as she does during Willoughby’s self-account, Elinor models the productive possibilities of witnessing another’s shame while not losing sight of one’s own. As *Sense and Sensibility* thematizes and tackles the problem of affected indifference and affective indulgence, Austen posits that sense, as much as sensibility, might find its best form in concert with shame, providing a mode of impassioned critical reading.

The blame that subtly shifts, in *Sense and Sensibility*, from Willoughby’s emotional displays to Elinor’s ways of reading them anticipates a more decisive emphasis in Austen’s following novels on heroines who simultaneously embody and evaluate the spectacle of shame. By collapsing the positions of spectacle and witness into her humiliated heroines, Austen continues to approach shame as a feeling with particular potential for the feminine performance of emotion and also pursues the possibilities of shameful reading only hinted at through Elinor. Elizabeth Bennet’s rereading of Darcy’s letter in *Pride and Prejudice*, which spurs reevaluations of others’ shame but most powerfully a “mortifying” review of her own, provides an especially self-conscious example of Austen exploring how shame can not only command a reader’s attention but also motivate a thoughtful revision of one’s

interpretive practices.²⁹ Another heroine of avowed sense, Elizabeth possesses a quick wit and “liveliness of ... mind,” but also evinces Elinor’s brand of “coolness of judgment” that risks verging on the “[c]old-hearted” (288). In interpreting correspondence, Elizabeth proves herself especially attuned to—and repulsed by—false emotional notes: when she hears the “high flown expressions” of Caroline Bingley’s letter to Jane, for example, the declarations of “the pain of separation” requiring a “very frequent and most unreserved correspondence” only yield, in the shrewd heroine, “all the insensibility of distrust” (79-80). Such ready “insensibility” might be well-adopted in Caroline’s case, but Austen also explores the affective and indeed intellectual dangers of erecting an overly severe guard against emotional vulnerability. For instance, when Jane recounts in a letter to Elizabeth her own eventual recognition of Caroline’s hurtful hypocrisy, “[t]his letter gave Elizabeth some pain; but her spirits returned as she considered that Jane would no longer be duped”: the cold comfort of critical insight appears to compromise, to some extent, even Elizabeth’s sympathy for her sister’s genuine epistolary displays of pain (100).

It is Elizabeth’s determination not to herself be “duped” by Darcy—her concerted, if not fully successful, efforts to sustain “all the insensibility of distrust” toward him early in their acquaintance—that especially gets her into interpretive trouble. Even when Darcy’s proposal and his subsequent letter begin to chip away at her adamant impassivity and the mistaken condemnations of him that it fuels, Elizabeth resists any sympathetic inclinations, and she does so especially by refusing to see in Darcy anything but shame. When reflecting on Darcy’s “gratifying” declaration of love after his first, failed proposal, Elizabeth bolsters herself against nascent “pity” by dwelling on the unremitting culpability she has mistakenly assigned

²⁹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 135. Further references will appear in the text.

to him: “But his pride, his abominable pride, his shameless avowal of what he had done with respect to Jane, his unpardonable assurance in acknowledging, though he could not justify it, and the unfeeling manner in which he had mentioned Mr. Wickham, his cruelty toward whom he had not attempted to deny, soon overcame the pity which the consideration of his attachment had for a moment excited” (128). In trying to ward off the mortification of finding herself “duped,” Elizabeth affects a detachment that, Austen suggests, actually fixates on keeping all shame firmly pinned on the “shameless” and “unpardonable” Darcy, while rejecting any that should rightly land on herself. When Elizabeth is next confronted with Darcy’s letter and its undeniable impact—the “contrariety of emotion [it] excited”—she again employs the tactic of trying to reduce Darcy’s words to a text of his thoroughgoing shame: “steadfastly was she persuaded that he could have no explanation to give, which a just sense of shame would not conceal” (134). In her detailed presentation of the rereadings and reassessments of the letter that follow, however, Austen revises her heroine’s aversion to shame, suggesting that it is not a rebuff but a redistribution of shame that can enable a savvy reader like Elizabeth to better achieve the critical insight and authority she seeks.

Elizabeth’s barrier of “insensibility” to Darcy’s letter first breaks down, though, not through her own shame, but instead through a sharp stab of emotional pain: during her first reading of the letter, as she proceeds from Darcy’s discussion of Jane to that of Wickham, Elizabeth ricochets from a determined cultivation of indifference into extreme suffering reminiscent of Willoughby’s similarly abrupt oscillation in *Sense and Sensibility*, and even conveyed in strikingly similar terms: “her feelings were yet more acutely painful and more difficult of definition. Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her” (135). Feelings “acutely painful” might jolt Elizabeth out of an unjust implacability toward Darcy, but

at the risk of “oppress[ing]” and overwhelming her. The narration further evokes the threat of *its own* overwhelming, as its language hearkens back to Willoughby’s floundering display of sensibility, positioned as a tired sentimental retread of “the common phrase, not to be expressed” and “a more simple one—perhaps too simple to raise any emotion—my feelings were very, very painful.” Attempting to infuse new emotion into the narrative, as much as the heroine, Austen’s style registers anxiety that this form of pain could imperil not just the character’s rational agency, but her own distinctive narrative voice. Austen, as much as Elizabeth, appears eager to resist the passivity of “acutely painful” feelings by quickly pushing the letter out of sight: “She wished to discredit it entirely . . . and when she had gone through the whole letter, though scarcely knowing any thing of the last page or two, put it hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, that she would never look in it again” (135).

Yet following the pattern of the “young lady” who “lays down her book with affected indifference” established in *Northanger Abbey*, the forcefully discarded letter does not stay put for long, and shame prompts its resuscitation. Here the attempt to spurn the letter is particularly short-lived, for “it would not do; in half a minute the letter was unfolded again, and collecting herself as well as she could, she again began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham, and commanded herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence” (135). As mortification edges out acute pain as her dominant response, Elizabeth emerges from “oppress[ion]” to a developing, if incomplete, “command” of her still highly emotional analysis of the letter. Yet in edging out the predominance of pain, shame does not erase it, nor any of the other feelings that variously wax and wane under the auspices of a “mortifying perusal” of the letter. Elizabeth’s increasing vulnerability to her own shame constantly recalibrates her perspectives on the letter’s content and the characters of those with which it is concerned; as the “mortifying perusal” circulates the shame once

affixed to Darcy—now to herself as well as Wickham—she recognizes her implication in an emotional and analytic inflexibility, one of the type Elinor avoids through her sensitivity to the waverings of both Willoughby's and her own shame. While Elinor “now blamed, now acquitted herself for having judged [Willoughby] so harshly before” to avoid the repetition of such harshness, Elizabeth is revealed to have distributed the extreme of each pole—of blame and acquittal—to Darcy and Wickham, respectively, at the expense of seeing either—or herself—clearly. Beyond keeping Elizabeth from reading Darcy correctly, her careful postures of “insensibility” in fact have aggravated her emotional susceptibility to Wickham in the guise of injured innocence, a lapse in judgment emphasized when Elizabeth realizes that “[s]he could see him instantly before her, in every charm of air and address; but she could remember no more substantial good than the general appropriation of the neighborhood” (136). Spurring a new consciousness of how uncritically she had let herself fall into both extremes, mortification also offers Elizabeth the possible means to mediate between them.

If Elizabeth's growing sense of shame puts her feelings about others into a productive flux, it also verges, at points, on fixing herself in their place. The “mortifying perusal” of Darcy's letter risks ending in a retraction of her excessive condemnation of him, only to plant it too “absolutely” on herself: “She grew absolutely ashamed of herself.—Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (137). However, when these thoroughly “mortifying” feelings appear poised to “oppress” the heroine as much as her earlier “acutely painful” ones, the narration suddenly shifts into a style that once again announces an affinity to sentimental convention, but in a much less anxious vein. The bulk of the narration of Elizabeth's varied responses to Darcy's letter takes third-person omniscient form; when Austen reaches the height of

Elizabeth's shame, though, she renders it in a first-person voice that comes closest to sentimental epistolary form:

“How despicably have I acted!” she cried.—“I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.—Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.” (137)

By departing from key elements of sentimental style—even as its privileged form of passionate self-narration is invoked—Austen enacts a revision of the sentimental ideal of absolute emotional coherence and possession as the means of self-definition. The insistent repetition of Elizabeth's “I” stages a different structure of interiority, where parts of a mutable self can be brought into productive relation through shame. While a heroine like Clarissa Harlowe must mourn when she feels split by shame that “*I, my best self*, have not escaped!” Elizabeth can proclaim at the “moment” of mortification “Till this moment, I never knew myself.”

This famous phrase encapsulates the particular form of shame that Austen embraces across her oeuvre as a mode of self-knowledge, rather than debilitating self-abasement—a form of shame that does not fully determine interior content and that distinguishes between aspects of the self without severing them from each other. Austen conveys this form of shame through Elizabeth's pairing of a present-tense “I,” emerging from a dawning sense of shame, with a “myself” of the past that is now revealed to have been devoid of shame until this enlightening “moment.” The passage's culminating assertion of an “I” with newfound knowledge of “myself,” to which that past self was “never” privy, marks the final incarnation of this formal strategy placing the present “I” *next to*—neither fully identical with nor alienated

from—the temporally and affectively receding version of “myself.” Through the interplay of these selves, Austen creates a formal space of self-examination where the shamed and shameless versions of the self coexist, so that neither is ever fully fixed as absolutely shameful. Turning her critical eye from others onto herself, Elizabeth’s shamed “I” casts “myself” as something of an other, and her first inclination is to adamantly pronounce herself “despicable.” As the incriminating evidence unfolds, however, the real culprit becomes harder to define. Elizabeth’s “I,” on the one hand, is distanced from shame even as it catalogues its many “humiliating” faults, for in so doing the “I” starts to display a “discernment” over which it might now justifiably show some “pride,” and “abilities” on which it might now properly place some “value.” If the emerging “I” is thus strangely shielded from some of the circulating shame by its very recognition of it, Elizabeth’s once-shameless “myself” might, on the other hand, appear positioned to now take more of shame’s brunt. But to the extent that the excesses of “myself” invite a long-overdue shaming, they also offer a sort of protection from it. As Elizabeth lingers on an overly “gratified . . . vanity” and a complete “prepossession and ignorance” rendered truly shameless by being kept intact and impervious to shame for so long, she embeds within the “moment” of intense shame the vivid memory of parts of “myself” particularly resistant to its force.

The form of Elizabeth’s shame thus enables a critical detachment that recognizes and addresses her past “folly” without ushering in the “oppression” of fixed shame or overwhelming alienation from oneself and others. This particular stance allows Elizabeth to continue gleaning “knowledge” from her “folly,” along with some of its cherished indulgences. The possibilities for both new knowledge and continued pleasures contained in “this moment” of Elizabeth’s “humiliation” evoke the structure of enhanced memory that Fisher finds in the rich “moment” of shame. As we have seen, the “moment” of shame, for Fisher, can move one away from an

extreme of extrasocial self-absorption, even as it avoids subsuming the individual in a “universalized and pervasive social existence.” Shame does this by forcing one to remember the demands of others and the restrictions of “social consciousness” more generally, while also allowing one to remember what it was like briefly to forget them. Shame thus contains a “moment” of potentially pleasurable yet distanced retrospection that also exposes a solipsistic spectacle of the past self with “an almost theatrical visibility to any and all who happen to be nearby”—a spectacle made newly conspicuous, for the shamed individual at least, at the instant that its fascinating self-absorption dissipates into shameful self-consciousness. In staging such a “moment” for Elizabeth, Austen especially emphasizes the autoerotic frisson of not just knowing but seeing “myself” anew through the illuminating hindsight of shame. For only at the instant of shameful recognition does Elizabeth fully apprehend the “prepossession and ignorance” she had unwittingly, yet assiduously “courted” as she had “driven reason away” like an unwanted suitor. The imagery treats Elizabeth’s past “vanity,” now fully exposed, as something of a lost “love” toward which she casts a longing, departing look.

Far from a last look, however, Darcy’s letter and the versions of past selves refracted through it are reviewed once again by Elizabeth *and* Darcy at the successful end of their courtship. At the point of romantic closure, when Elizabeth finally accepts Darcy’s marriage proposal, the narrative also revives the “mortifying” letter as a source of pleasurable indulgence as much as shameful memory. From Darcy’s perspective the resurgent letter looks an intractable memento of “unpardonable” words and “conduct” that are “inexpressibly painful” for him to recall: “I hope you have destroyed the letter,” he declares (239, 240). While Elizabeth concurs that she is “most heartily ashamed” of events surrounding the letter, she does not concede to Darcy’s solution (240). After facetiously answering that “[t]he letter shall certainly be

burnt,” she counters with a proposal for its deliberate revision rather than destruction:

“But think no more of the letter. The feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different from what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten. You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.” (240)

At first a seemingly grand gesture of purging the past of “every unpleasant circumstance” by completely erasing memories of pain and shame, Elizabeth’s “philosophy” in fact imagines a form of “remembrance” in which the traces of shame are part of what “gives . . . pleasure.” Elizabeth’s previous “moment” of shame has checked, yet still sustained self-indulgent extravagance by refusing to entirely forget its possibility; this “philosophy” of pleasure further loosens the hold of shame itself, while clinging to the memory of possible shame that animates the very intensity of present pleasure. Insofar as Elizabeth’s conjuring of pleasurable “remembrance” thrives on recognizing differences—on detailing how “[t]he feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different from what they were then”—the differentiating force of shame is a significant contributing factor, even if the distance to be marked is from an excessively shameless version of the self *and* one overly susceptible to shame. Rather than desiring to return to her previous state of blissfully shameless “blind[ness]” and “ignorance,” Elizabeth knowingly relishes the imaginative agency of a self-conscious and willful, and hence necessarily partial, fantasy of forgetting “every unpleasant circumstance” that could impinge on the authority of the self. Indeed the letter appears to be reintroduced and further revised at this late point in the narrative to signal how far one can come from the prospect of an overpowering, destructive humiliation without losing connection to its form—a self-conscious novelistic remaking of shame that for Austen, much like Burney, has implications for novelist and novel reader, “[t]he feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it.”

As Austen's humiliated heroines eagerly take up letters in the novels that follow *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen takes up and elaborates the concern with which *Pride and Prejudice* ends: that the intensity of pleasure, as much as pain, can constitute an engrossing sensibility. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Radcliffe articulates the widely held view that sensibility's "dangerous quality" is "continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance" so that "we become the victim of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them" (79-80); in *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price becomes just such a "victim" of inordinate "delight" in a scene of reading that links the heroine's attempt to balance desire and "duty" to particularly self-reflexive ruminations on the novelist's temptations and limitations.³⁰ Shortly after Edmund Bertram leaves Fanny with the welcome gift of a necklace and an unfinished note from him to accompany it, but also the unwelcome news that she is only *one* of his "two dearest objects . . . on earth," Fanny braces herself with the "intention, as she felt it to be her duty, to try to overcome all that was excessive, all that bordered on selfishness in her affection for Edmund" (181). But the tokens of Edmund's own affection, especially in the form of a letter, quickly upset "all these good resolutions on the side of self-government":

[S]he seized the scrap of paper on which Edmund had begun writing to her, as a treasure beyond all her hopes, and reading with the tenderest emotion these words, "My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept"—locked it up with the chain, as the dearest part of the gift. It was the only thing approaching to a letter which she had ever received from him; she might never receive another; it was impossible that she ever should receive another so perfectly gratifying in the occasion and the style. Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author—never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer. The enthusiasm of a woman's love is even beyond the biographer's. To her, the hand-writing itself, independent of any thing it may convey, is a blessedness. Never were such characters cut by any human being, as Edmund's commonest hand-writing gave! This specimen, written in haste as it was, had not a fault: and

³⁰ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (New York: Norton, 1998), 181. Further references will appear in the text.

there was a felicity in the flow of the first four words, in the arrangement of “My very dear Fanny,” which she could have looked at for ever. (181-182)

If Fanny finds in Edmund’s letter a form “perfectly gratifying in the occasion and the style,” its impact appears to derive heavily from the “gratifying” fantasy of a perfect match between form and content. Such an ideal, as we have seen, drives sentimental signification: a heroine like Clarissa ardently cultivates—and proffers for her readers’ emulation—the unadulterated signification of her interior suffering, while a sentimental reader like Adeline avidly submits to textual signs of another’s unrelenting misery that just as completely designate the emotional content of her responsive interiority. In a similar fashion, Fanny “seize[s]” on a signifier that can define her—“My very dear Fanny”—and which she is eager to absolutely claim. The phrase offers a “specimen” that “had not a fault” partly to the extent that it delineates a version of herself that could faultlessly submit to her passionate “affection” for its writer, while considering herself, with unmitigated delight, equally “dear” to him. The compelling material quality of the “hand-writing,” the fascinating “cut” of the “characters,” thus seems to emerge less from the ostensibly irrelevant nature of the content (from a form “independent of any thing it may convey”) than from a signifying form so well-cut to fit Fanny’s desire and to fabricate her uncompromised pleasures that she fervidly overlooks any gaps between form and content.

As Fanny reads her “prized” letter, the delights and more implicit problems of her susceptible sensibility are cast in an increasingly linguistic, even literary vein. The narrator contrasts the qualities of a private letter with those of a published text: “Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author.” But the distinct effects that the narrator attributes in this passage to something “approaching to a letter” also resonate with those of the novelistic sentimental epistolary form that both troubles and entices Austen. The narration teems with a longing, approaching envy, for a style that would be experienced by a reader as

“perfectly gratifying,” having a transparency and immediacy of signification that incites investments analogous to “the enthusiasm of woman’s love.” But insofar as such “enthusiasm” involves the suspension of critical judgment—here Fanny’s refusal to recognize the obstacles complicating this perfect signifier’s suggestion that she is singularly “very dear”—it is a fantasy of faultlessly gratifying reading that both Fanny and the narrator will only indulge for so long. Fanny subsequently leaves the room of her private reading and “resume[s] her usual employments” at Mansfield Park “[h]aving regulated her thoughts and comforted her feelings by this happy mixture of reason and weakness” (182). If Fanny’s “reading [of Edmund’s note] with tenderest emotion” is her moment of “weakness,” the shameful reading of herself that leads up to it appears to add the dose of “reason” to the mix. However, this depiction of Fanny’s humiliating self-review before she “seize[s] the scrap of paper” achieves its own “happy mixture of reason and weakness” in the moment of shame, which itself blends aspects of sentimental gratification with the exercise of self-conscious reflection and restraint.

Immediately before plunging herself wholeheartedly into Edmund’s wonderfully flawless note, Fanny reads herself and her real relation to Edmund with a more discriminating eye, undertaking a careful process of precise self-narration. The interior content that emerges within the “confines of her imagination” appears to require signifiers much more shameful than “dear”:

It was her intention, as she felt it to be her duty, to try to overcome all that was excessive, all that bordered on selfishness in her affection for Edmund. To call or to fancy it a loss, a disappointment, would be a presumption; for which she had not words strong enough to satisfy her own humility. To think of him as Miss Crawford might be justified in thinking, would in her be insanity. To her, he could be nothing under any circumstances—nothing dearer than a friend. Why did such an idea occur to her even enough to be reprobated and forbidden? It ought not to have touched on the confines of her imagination. She would endeavour to be rational, and to deserve the right of judging of Miss Crawford’s character and the privilege of true solicitude for him by a sound intellect and an honest heart. (181)

Looking for “words strong enough to satisfy her own humility,” Fanny undertakes a vigorous self-abasement, grappling with seemingly irrefutable signs of her shame. A space of indulgent excess also appears, though, different from the delights of reading herself in Edmund’s “prized” letter: here this space contains the pleasures of entertaining an ostensibly self-defining signifier that is not completely owned, that never quite affixes itself to one’s interiority with full force. While Fanny conjures words meant to capture her “own humility,” they instead reveal the extent to which her sense of shame is compromised, not just leaving room for but even producing shameless resistance. When Fanny pushes the designation of her “presumption” to the more scathing label of “insanity,” for example, the passage’s castigating diction starts to court its own extravagance, and also illuminates the fleeting appearance of a transgressive “idea” (that she could be *something* “dearer than a friend”) that should be completely “reprobated and forbidden” from her mind, yet clearly is not. By filtering Fanny’s shame through what appears to be the character’s own carefully chosen yet constantly shifting words, Austen accentuates how Fanny can simultaneously, incompletely impose and escape the dictates of her social “duty” though the self-conscious invocation of stark yet capacious forms of shame.

Austen’s use of free indirect discourse raises the further possibility that even some of these words signifying Fanny’s shame might not be her own. The ambiguity of voicing in free indirect discourse is especially highlighted, in this instance, by the suggestion that Fanny nurses a “presumption; for which she had not words strong enough to satisfy her own humility.” The subsequent labeling of her shame, particularly the stamp of her “insanity” and proclamation that certain shameless thoughts “ought not to have touched on the confines of her imagination,” thus flirts with the force of the narrator’s authority to mark her as unequivocally shameful, while the constant swells and ebbs of Fanny’s idiolect destabilize any simple, complete

representation of her extreme shame as an established narrative fact. The layering of voices allows Austen to “satisfy” various shaming functions at once—to evoke the form of a punitive, definitive humiliation that still seems to waver in the degrees of its actual interior emotional content. Harnessing an effect of renarration similar to that spread over pages in *Sense and Sensibility* and squeezed into the phrasal relation between “I” and “myself” in *Pride and Prejudice*, free indirect discourse condenses such renarration of a character’s possible selves into single signifiers of emotional states that are variously inflected by the different plausible sources of their articulation.

While the narrator’s vocal presence thus disrupts the emotional consistency characteristic of sentimental self-narration, it does not deaden the impact of Fanny’s emotional display. The imagery of the passage figures the “confines of [Fanny’s] imagination” as a material expanse, one vulnerable to being “touched” along its shifting “border[s].” The spectacle is particularly animated by the prospect of shame that exposes interiority and especially “all that was excessive, all the bordered on selfishness.” Shame thus accentuates, for Fanny and for the reader, the sight of trespassing words and ideas that, unlike those of the sentimental spectacle, flicker most tangibly at the moment they are being “reprobated,” “forbidden,” and expelled from the “confines of her imagination.” Austen’s use of free indirect discourse further materializes the contents of Fanny’s mind by asking the reader to demarcate, much like Fanny herself, the exact “confines of her imagination.” The presence of the narrator’s voice thus constructs a personal voice for the heroine that invites rapt attention not through its direct address and transparent immediacy, but through a “quality of now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t” that, as Dorrit Cohn aptly describes, “exerts a special fascination” because the “dubious attribution of language to the figural mind” combined with the “fusion of narratorial and figural language charge[s]

it with ambiguity.”³¹ By staging shame in this narrative form, as she often does in her later novels, Austen heightens the compelling quality of the spectacle of shame while further destabilizing its emotional contents, enabling her to retain yet significantly rework the coveted emotional impact of something “approaching to a letter.” Austen’s persistently humiliated heroines offer a hermeneutic model of reading with a “happy mixture of reason and weakness,” while also providing the spectacle of a shamed interiority that is vividly but incompletely exposed and defined and thus entices readers to look closely and think critically as they negotiate ambiguous attributions of shame.

While Fanny finds a “mixture of reason and weakness” within her moment of shameful self-reflection, she still eagerly “seize[s] the scrap of paper” afterwards as if a deserved indulgence, a fair reward for her exertions. The heroines of *Emma* and *Persuasion* similarly work through stretches of shame, rendered to a great extent in free indirect discourse, to gain, at the end, a deeply gratifying letter. For all the marked differences between Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot, the affective trajectories of their stories coincide at this point. Emma discovers in Frank Churchill’s final letter, which clarifies his past actions and the details of his secret engagement, a text that “must make its way to Emma’s feelings . . . As soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible; every line relating to herself was interesting, and almost every line agreeable.”³² Anne finds in Frederick Wentworth’s declaration of love “a letter [that] was not to be soon recovered from” that brings “an overpowering happiness.”³³ In her final novels Austen seems ready to grant pride of place to the delightful letter within the affective structure of the narrative, invoking it

³¹ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 107.

³² Jane Austen, *Emma*, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 2000), 291. Further references will appear in the text.

³³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 223. Further references will appear in the text.

as a means of resolution more than a problem to be solved. But in so doing, the narrative “seize[s]” on the pangs of shame each letter faintly revives almost as eagerly as its pleasures. In *Persuasion*, Wentworth’s love letter is positioned to eradicate all traces of Anne’s sustained “silent, deep mortification” over their relationship—especially the devastating mortification of learning that Wentworth had called her “[a]ltered beyond his knowledge” (57). Such complete erasure of shame is entertained and resisted, however, when Wentworth reiterates to Anne that “to my eye you could never alter” shortly after she has read his letter: “Anne smiled, and let it pass,” but rather than let the prevarication fully stand, the heroine and narrator linger on the pleasure that is augmented by the resurgence of shameful memories now blended with the moment of newfound bliss: “It was too pleasing a blunder for a reproach. It is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth; but the value of such homage was inexpressibly increased to Anne, by comparing it with former words, and feeling it to be the result, not the cause of a revival of his warm attachment” (228).

In a similar manner, Emma finds Frank Churchill’s letter “irresistible” on first reading, despite its being “a most mortifying retrospect” for its writer that also touches on numerous shameful lapses in Emma’s past behavior and judgment (289); upon subsequent review, though, when Knightley reads the letter and comments aloud to Emma on its most striking parts, the vestiges of shame attract particular notice. “Frank Churchill’s confession of having behaved shamefully was the first thing to call for more than a word in passing,” followed by the imminent reemergence of Emma’s own mortifications: “Emma knew that he was now getting to the Box-Hill party, and grew uncomfortable. Her own behaviour had been so very improper! She was deeply ashamed, and a little afraid of his next look. It was all read, however, steadily, attentively, and without the smallest remark; and, excepting one momentary glance at

her, instantly withdrawn, in the fear of giving pain—no remembrance of Box-Hill seemed to exist” (293). Knightley ends with a focus on the phrase “Happier than I deserve”—a state that seems to resound for these readers, bound by the “momentary glance” of shame, as much as for the original author (294). Of all of Austen’s scenes of shameful renarrating and rereading, *Emma*’s circulation of the “mortifying” letter between varied readers who each reinflect the text to illuminate the fluctuating shame and “happi[ness]” of others *and* themselves perhaps best captures the dynamics of Austen’s novelistic shaming “glance.” In scope it takes in the ostensible spectacle of shame, the humiliated protagonist, and through this spectacle opens onto others—her readers, her literary predecessors and contemporaries, and even herself; in form it reimagines the bounds of convention to transmute the look of someone “pain[ed]” or “deeply ashamed” into the “momentary glance” of shame “instantly withdrawn” yet leaving a palpable, reanimating mark.

CHAPTER TWO

“HALF ASHAMED OF BEING CAUGHT IN THE MELTING MOOD”:

SHAME AND SENTIMENTALITY IN *VANITY FAIR*

The author indulges in no sentimentalities—inflicts no fine writing on his readers. Trusting to the force of truth and humour, he is the *quietest* of contemporary writers,—a merit worth noting in a literary age which has a tendency to mistake spasm for force. . . . Mr. Thackeray grows serious and pathetic at times—but almost as if he were ashamed of it, like a man caught in tears at the theatre.

—George Henry Lewes, review of *Vanity Fair* in *The Athenæum* (1848)

SHAMEFUL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Does *Vanity Fair* have an emotional problem? The acute self-consciousness of William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel, generally lauded as its great aesthetic merit, nonetheless appears to come at a steep emotional cost. George Levine, for example, dubs *Vanity Fair* “one of the most self-conscious books written in the period,” with the result that “the satire edges toward contempt” and adopts a commonly “ironic, one might almost say, embittered, tone.”¹ In recent readings of *Vanity Fair*, the novel’s “self-consciousness” proves malleable, connoting a wide-ranging, heightened critical awareness of social and, especially, literary conventions. But across such readings, self-consciousness consistently entails emotional detachment, whether in the form of a contempt that repulses connections—with individuals, the text, or the social world, more broadly—or of a more thoroughgoing waning of any emotional interest. Contempt, at least, provides some affective charge, especially when set next to the nearly complete diminishment of emotion that other readers attribute to the novel’s self-consciousness, especially that of its ironic and extremely intrusive narrator. For Barbara Hardy, the narrator consistently “criticizes everyone, including himself, for

¹ George Levine, *How to Read the Victorian Novel* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 60, 65.

vain feeling,” such that “all emotions are contaminated in *Vanity Fair*.”² Robyn Warhol makes *Vanity Fair* exemplary of her concept of distancing narrating strategies (a mode opposed to engaging strategies), based on the novel’s “ironic distance . . . between the actual reader and the contents of the text,” a distance which she attributes to extreme “self-conscious artifice” and the ways in which “the narrator obviously disavows any faith in straight-faced, earnest sentimentality.”³ As Warhol’s analysis suggests, emotional investment, on its side, tends to take the specific form of sentimentality, such that critics view *Vanity Fair* as pitting its critical and detached self-consciousness against an excessively emotive and attached sentimentality. As Wolfgang Iser declares in his influential 1974 reading of the novel, the reader is made “perfectly miserable” by *Vanity Fair*, and Thackeray, withholding the “flood of sympathy” incited by an author like Charles Dickens, only alleviates such misery through a “predominantly intellectual appeal to the mind of the reader.”⁴ This pervasive sense of the novel’s stark opposition between foolish feelings and detached analysis has left us miserable ever since.

If *Vanity Fair* has an emotional problem, it has been felt perhaps most sharply as a concomitant problem of gender ideology. Contextualizing the novel within Victorian debates on reading, Kate Flint connects its gendered rupture between critical detachment and sentimental over-identification to a binary understanding of masculine rationality and feminine emotional susceptibility at work in the culture at large.

² Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: P. Owen, 1985), 85-6.

³ Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989), 90, 41, 93.

⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), 116, 113. Iser takes the term misery from an instance of the narrator’s direct address in *Vanity Fair*: “Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells? This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object—to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private” (190). William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Norton, 1994). Further references will appear in the text.

Vanity Fair, she concludes, ultimately accords little analytic prowess or interpretive agency to emotive, feminized characters and narratees: “to read well, for Thackeray, was to read as a man.”⁵ The novel’s self-conscious narration thus perpetuates a culturally potent Victorian gender division: Flint argues that, for Thackeray, “it is men who . . . have the capacity to develop the arts of self-irony and self-criticism, and to adopt the varied perspectives which the narrative tone of *Vanity Fair* encourages throughout.”⁶ She further asserts, “the mode of reading which Thackeray most admires and wishes to promote is one which does not deny readerly pleasure, but which goes hand in hand with a capacity to stand back from too close, too emotional an involvement with fictional characters and situations.”⁷ While Flint allows for some “readerly pleasure” in Thackeray’s model of masculine reading, she also echoes other critics’ alignment of self-conscious narration with disrupted affective interest, linking “a degree of literary self-consciousness” in the narrator’s intrusions to an “air of knowing, if fatigued, wisdom tinged with nostalgia” and “world-weary questions.”⁸

Thus, by many recent critical accounts, as the extreme self-consciousness of *Vanity Fair* responds to the charged affective interest associated most specifically with feminized sentimentality, it either creates the emotional detachment of contempt, or it deflates *any* substantial emotional investment. But what if we consider self-consciousness as itself a highly charged affective mode, one with the potential to mediate between critical detachment and sentimental absorption? In common usage, after all, one indeed *feels* self-conscious. If we understand self-consciousness *as* emotion, rather than its necessary antagonist, then shame—as a central feeling, if not *the* definitive feeling, of self-consciousness—becomes particularly relevant to our

⁵ Kate Flint, “Women, Men, and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*,” in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, eds. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 262.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 248-49.

understanding of Thackeray's self-conscious style. The heightened self-consciousness of shame evinces an awareness of the self recognizing and relating to the conventional as it comes into conflict with it—an affective form that might disrupt absolute identification with others, but that does not necessarily sever emotional ties. Yet the critical self-consciousness of social and literary conventions commonly attributed to *Vanity Fair* has been most often understood in opposition to emotion, or at least to emotional attachments. While Thackeray's readers have productively explored the significant tension between critical detachment and sentimental indulgence in his oeuvre, a neglected connection, between self-consciousness and shame, also importantly shapes his work. In the discussion that follows, I pursue this connection, arguing that *Vanity Fair*'s oft-noted social and literary self-consciousness is infused with the affective intensities of embodied self-consciousness figured as shame, particularly as feminized shame.

Recognizing Thackeray's fixation on feminized shame complicates perceptions of his work as dismissively rejecting feminized emotion's analytic and aesthetic potential. *Vanity Fair* does indeed problematize sentimentality, associating it with both dangerously absorbing feminine spectacle and a feminized mode of unreflective, overpowering affective engagement. The novel's depiction of intense, feminized emotion is not limited to sentimentality, however. Thackeray explores shame as a feeling that, though it can be deployed sentimentally, also offers the potential to negotiate sentimentality's most troubling aesthetic and affective features. The shameful woman especially figures shame's risks and possibilities in *Vanity Fair*. Within the world of the novel, shame facilitates moments of emotional reconnection and re-evaluation, mediating between characters' tendencies toward sentimental delusion and critical disengagement. Thackeray portrays shame as a form of heightened self-awareness that does not necessarily dissolve emotional ties, whether to

aesthetic objects, to specific individuals, or to society; and such shameful self-consciousness extends beyond characterization within the plot, figuring emotive yet analytic registers of narration and readerly engagement as well. Thackeray's narrator suspects sentimental spectacles, but rather than violently distance himself from the emotive woman, he finds in shameful spectacles a more appealing model for his own desired rhetorical effects—revisionary effects, designed to produce intense and immediate emotional impact *and* draw on accumulated interpretive insight. The shamed woman in *Vanity Fair* thus figures both effective narration and desired reader response. The novel's famously self-conscious narrative strategies, particularly direct address to the reader that draws attention to the conventions of literary production and reception, function stylistically to expose a shameful narrator and reader. We might therefore better describe the mode of literary engagement valorized by the novel not as “to read as a man,” but to read as a woman—specifically a shameful woman.

Shameful self-consciousness complicates the binary understanding of sentimentality and critical detachment pervasive not only in criticism of *Vanity Fair*, but in recent debates on sentimentality more generally. Feminist criticism has been particularly active in reclaiming sentimentality as an affective and aesthetic mode that both warrants critical attention and can itself offer a valuable mode of critical analysis. Yet while sentimentality has been a major topic of debate in readings of nineteenth-century American literature and culture, studies of its nineteenth-century British context have been relatively few, with discussion of the sentimental tending to focus on eighteenth-century British sensibility.⁹ Critics continue to highlight the need for

⁹ June Howard provides a useful overview of studies of sentimentality in nineteenth-century America in “What Is Sentimentality?” *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 63-81. Studies of sensibility, sentimentality and sentimentalism in eighteenth-century Britain include: G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992); Barbara M. Benedict, *Framing Feeling: Sentiment and Style in English Prose Fiction, 1745-1800* (New York: AMS Press, 1994); Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995); and Janet M. Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

greater attention to British Victorian sentimentality, in terms of both its historical specificity and its relevance to sentimentality as a broader modern phenomenon.¹⁰ My reading of Thackeray's negotiation of sentimentality through shame attempts to meet this need by expanding our conception of significant Victorian emotions beyond sympathy and sentimentality to shame. When shame surfaces in discussions of sentimentality—as it invariably does, though usually in passing—it is normally aligned with the critical contempt against which the writer wishes to defend sentimentality.¹¹ Rather than defend sentimentality *against* shame, I propose a defense

¹⁰Miriam Bailin argues that “the critical organizing principles that have provided common points of departure in discussions of eighteenth-century British or nineteenth-century American sentimental fiction do not adequately account for the Victorian British variety” in “‘Dismal Pleasure’: Victorian Sentimentality and the Pathos of the Parvenu,” *ELH* 66, no. 4 (1999): 1015. A 2007 special issue on “Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality” highlights the continuing need for studies of sentimentality focused on Victorian British culture, with Nicola Brown arguing “to open up public discussion of an aspect of Victorian culture that is too often ignored or maligned (even if surreptitiously enjoyed in private)” in “Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell,” *19: Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 4 (April 2007): 2. For additional studies of Victorian sentimentality, see Philip Davis, “Victorian Realist Prose and Sentimentality,” in *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, eds. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); Howard Fulweiler, “‘Why, Tears! Is It? Tears’: Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Sentimentality,” *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea* 65 (1990): 486-93; Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987); Laurence Lerner, *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1997); and Winfield H. Rogers, “The Reaction Against Melodramatic Sentimentality in the English Novel, 1796-1830,” *PMLA* 49, no. 1 (1934): 98-122.

¹¹Robert C. Solomon's “In Defense of Sentimentality” positions itself most directly against contempt and disdain of sentimentality, arguing that the widespread current contempt of sentimentality—in philosophy as well as in the culture at large—is “an extension of that all-too-familiar contempt for the passions in Western literature and philosophy. Our disdain for sentimentality is the rationalist's discomfort with any display of emotion, warranted as well as unwarranted, appropriate as well as inappropriate” (226). However, his essay exemplifies how a defense of sentimentality that is ostensibly against contempt can easily slide, at times, into a defense against shame and embarrassment, seen as necessary extensions of such contempt. He argues, for example, that “the fact that [sentimentality] may make for some very bad art and literature should not be used to encourage our embarrassment at experiencing these quite natural sentiments or to discourage those sentiments themselves” (243). Deborah Knight makes a similar elision between what she sees as a “near universal condemnation” of sentimentality and its evocation of embarrassment and disgrace: “But as we continue with the standard philosophical story, we find that sentimentality is not just unseemly; it is disgraceful. Any public or excessive display of emotion should, it seems, embarrass us” (411, 414). Some of the critics who have focused on revaluing Victorian sentimentality, more specifically, similarly align condemnation and shame, casting shame as a primarily repressive force that blocks our full critical appreciation of and access to sentimentality. Nicola Brown, for example, argues that “Victorian sentimentality is easy to identify, and just as easy to condemn. It has been harder, though we may fall prey to its lures in our own reading and viewing, to speak about it critically yet sympathetically” (1). When Brown turns to a reading of Little Nell's death scene, shame is squarely set in opposition to sentimental feeling: “its power lies in its ability to make us feel, and if it does not do that, it is not doing what Dickens has set out to do. He wanted to make his readers cry, and I have little doubt he wept himself. There is no

of sentimentality *through* shame. The complex aesthetic interaction of shame and sentimentality in *Vanity Fair* demands a more thorough theorization of why shame so insistently hovers around sentimentality, one that distinguishes shame's function from that of dismissive contempt. In the following readings of the shame, sentimentality, and literary self-consciousness at work in Thackeray's essays of the 1840s (particularly "Going to See a Man Hanged") and, especially, in *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), I hope to show how such distinctions can enrich studies of Victorian emotions and aesthetics as well as broader, interdisciplinary considerations of sentimentality's fraught status.

"SPOKEN FACE TO FACE WITH THE READER"

Granted, that there is a something faulty, which we seek to denote by the term, it may be worthwhile to endeavour to define the accusation, before considering whether the works in question are bound to plead guilty to it, or not. Sentimentality is not simply an excess of passionate feeling, for its chief characteristic is feebleness rather than strength of any kind. . . . On the whole, difficult as it is to seize the precise meaning of "winged words," it would perhaps be tolerably near the mark to say, that sentimentality is not merely an exaggeration of feeling, unregulated by reason, and ludicrously incommensurate with the triviality of its object; but, further—and this is an essential part of it—that it is an indulgence of feeling for feeling's sake; that lives in an atmosphere of fancy, and collapses instantaneously, if brought into contact with the actual; in a word, that it is a caricature of really strong deep feeling.

—Anonymous reviewer, *North British Review* (1851)

While "sentimentality" entered British usage in the late eighteenth century in response to the "cult of sensibility," the term continued to accrue cultural relevance,

shame, in my view, in finding this passage extremely moving: it is sentimental and it should make its readers feel sentimental feelings" (11). Brown further implies an opposition between embarrassment and the capacity to like or enjoy sentimentality when she asks: "Do you ever find yourself coming over all sentimental? And if you do, do you like it, or do you feel embarrassed by your sentimental proclivities? Is sentimentality a pleasurable indulgence, a minor vice, or a lapse of aesthetic and moral taste?" (1). See Robert C. Solomon, "In Defense of Sentimentality," in *Emotion and the Arts*, eds. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, eds. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); and Deborah Knight, "Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality: A Meta-Aesthetic Perspective," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 4 (1999): 411-20.

and a sharp pejorative edge, well into the next century.¹² As with “sensibility” in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and “sensationalism” later in the nineteenth century, in the term “sentimentality” there coalesced diverse and indeterminate mid-nineteenth-century anxieties over feminized emotional extravagance and susceptibility. As the anonymous reviewer suggests in the pages of the *North British Review* quoted above, though it generally might be “granted” at the time “that there is a something faulty” hovering around sentimentality, the nature of these faults was not nearly so clear.¹³ Working prolifically as a journalist in the 1840s, Thackeray engaged in the search for those “bound to plead guilty” to sentimentality, displaying his own sense of sentimentality’s most troublesome infractions of style and ethics. In his 1845 essay “Picture Gossip,” in *Fraser’s Magazine*, Thackeray’s art-critic persona Michael Angelo Titmarsh assigns guilt with “the prize of a new silver teaspoon.”¹⁴ Bemoaning “illustrious examples” at the London art exhibition of “a love for lollipops with a vengeance, a regular babyhood of taste” and “drivelling hysterical sentimentality,” he pits two rival “champion[s] of suffering female innocence” against each other for his “namby-pamby” award (451, 452, 453, 452). His critique of the painters focuses on manipulatively formulaic depictions of miserable women, whose emotive physical gestures are paired with obtrusive pathetic signals (such as “a most tremendous black-edged letter” and “‘Home, sweet home!’ . . . open in the music-book”) (452). Disturbed by the forced and unambiguous emotional legibility of these scenarios, he asks, “Is not there something *naïve* and simple in this downright way of exciting compassion?” (452). And yet, he notes, “I saw people looking at this pair of pictures with yearning hearts. The great geniuses who invented them have not, you see, toiled

¹² See Todd, 8.

¹³ “Recent Works of Fiction,” *North British Review* 15 (1851): 419-20.

¹⁴ William Makepeace Thackeray, “Picture Gossip,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 31 (June 1845), in *Ballads and Miscellanies* (New York: Harper, 1899), 451. Further references will appear in the text.

in vain. They can command the sympathies of the public” (452). Thackeray’s suspicion of trite yet moving artistic convention contains a fear of the excessive vulnerability of a “yearning” and “melt[ing]” viewer, subject to the artist’s “command”:

I have said before I am growing more inclined to the pathetic daily, but let us in the name of goodness take a stand somewhere, or the namby-pamby of the world will become unendurable; and we shall melt away in a deluge of blubber. This drivelling hysterical sentimentality, it is surely the critic’s duty to grin down, to shake any man roughly by the shoulder who seems dangerously affected by it, and, not sparing his feelings in the least, tell him he is a fool for his pains, to have no more respect for those who invent it, but expose their errors with all the downrightness that is necessary. (452-53)

At stake, here, are the emotional contours of the “critic’s duty,” presented as an aggressive assault on sentimental excess. The “critic’s duty” is not, however, to reject outright the feelings in question—compassion, sorrow, and pity—or the paintings’ subject matter. Thackeray contrasts the “namby-pamby” pictures with “pictures indicating a fine appreciation of the tragic sentiment,” in response to which “the spectator gives his compassion the more readily because the unfortunate object makes no coarse demands upon his pity” (454). For Thackeray, fulfilling the “critic’s duty” depends upon recognizing when a work of arts’ “demands” on the viewer are “coarse” and attempt to elicit an overly docile response in the consumer.

While Thackeray easily lambasts “drivelling hysterical sentimentality” in “Picture Gossip,” his attitude toward sentimentality becomes more defensive and ambivalent when he adopts—also in the pages of *Fraser’s*—a position vulnerable to just such an attack. Thackeray’s personal account of witnessing a public execution in his 1840 essay “Going to See a Man Hanged” culminates in the confession “that the sight has left on my mind an extraordinary feeling of terror and shame” and the wish “that it may soon be out of the power of any man in England to witness such a hideous

and degrading sight.”¹⁵ Anticipating charges of sentimentality, Thackeray recognizes that “many persons, and well-informed newspapers, say that it is mawkish sentiment to talk in this way, morbid humanity, cheap philanthropy, that any man can get up and preach about” (157). He even ventriloquizes the potential insult of “Away with your foolish sentimentalists” (157). The “critic’s duty” shifts, in this case, toward defending a sentimentality that is set in opposition to the “tremendous sarcasm” and insensitivity that he notes in other newspaper accounts of the event (157). At the same time, Thackeray attempts to ward off the taint of the “mawkish,” “morbid,” and “cheap” in his approach, even as he acknowledges them as specters haunting any sentimental scene. Thackeray finds himself unable to rest securely in the position of rational “critic,” recognizing his additional roles as emotively responsive viewer and linguistic re-creator of the tragic spectacle in his detailed report of the hanging. He may wish to remove such an execution from public view, doubting the claim that it is socially “beneficial,” but he also raises the possibility of its beneficial linguistic representation for the public, suggesting gingerly that “the next useful thing must be a full description of such a ceremony, and all its entourages, and to this end the above pages are offered to the reader” (156). Providing a “full” and “useful” account of the execution means, for Thackeray, emphasizing individualized emotional response. A list of questions follows that apply to Thackeray’s personal experience, but also to the reader’s textually mediated access to the violent spectacle: “How does an individual man feel under it—In what way does he observe it,—how does he view all the phenomena connected with it,—what induces him, in the first instance, to go and see it,—and how is he moved by it afterwards?” (156). For Thackeray, sentimentality raises the issue of not just what should occur, but how one should respond to and

¹⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, “Going to See a Man Hanged,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 22 (1840): 156. Further references will appear in the text.

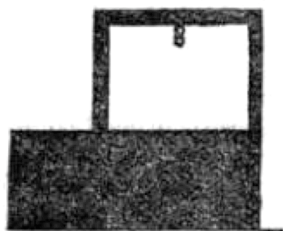
represent experience—issues that inflect Thackeray’s literary realism as well.

Before turning my attention to *Vanity Fair*, then, I want briefly to explore Thackeray’s sentimentality in “Going to See a Man Hanged,” in order to highlight the main emotional and formal features that Thackeray ascribes to a sentimental spectacle, and to pinpoint those features that especially trouble him. “Going to See a Man Hanged” pointedly illustrates what will be even more pertinent to our focus on shame in *Vanity Fair*: how invoking shame allows Thackeray to negotiate the risks of sentimentality—its “mawkish,” “morbid,” and “cheap” strands—instead of merely dispensing with it completely. If sentimentality works as an affective mode of spectacular identification that produces intense, immediate emotional effect, in Thackeray’s essay the value of such effect is weighed against an array of potential problems, social and aesthetic, arising from it—problems related especially to individualized subjectivity, aesthetic convention, and reflective narrative temporality. Thackeray seeks to stave off the extreme of “drivelling hysterical sentimentality” by portraying the public execution as a “sight [that] has left on my mind an extraordinary feeling of terror *and* shame,” and by representing the sight with a similar affective aim on the reader (*italics mine*). Shame emerges as an alternative affective mode that productively interacts with sentimentality—associated here with terror-fueled pity—and mediates between excessive sentimentality and callous detachment.

Early in the essay, long before the execution itself is described, Thackeray recalls the “gallows-shock” of simply confronting the instrument of death (151). The gallows looms as an instrument of death but also an instrument of affect, and Thackeray incorporates it as such into his own text, which combines description and visual illustration to reproduce the experience of his arrival at the execution site:

It is twenty minutes past four as we pass St. Sepulchre’s: by this time many hundred people are in the street, and many more are coming up Snow Hill. Before us lies Newgate Prison; but something a great deal more awful to look

at, which seizes the eye at once, and makes the heart beat, is



There it stands black and ready, jutting out from a little door in the prison. As you see it, you feel a kind of dumb electric shock, which causes one to start a little, and give a sort of gasp for breath. The shock is over in a second; and presently you examine the object before you with a certain feeling of complacent curiosity. (151)

The gallows and their attendant “gallows-shock” starkly embody sentimentality’s mode of spectacular identification—an identification that has two facets. The first facet is an affective response of emotional equivalence that is registered on the body. The dramatic visual spectacle of the gallows—“which seizes the eye at once, and makes the heart beat”—produces in the spectator an emotional identification with the future victim’s terror and pain so complete that one “give[s] a sort of gasp for breath,” as if also being hanged. The spectator’s complete emotional identification with the victim relies on the ability easily and unambiguously to identify the victim’s feelings. Accordingly, the second facet of sentimentality’s spectacular identification is a system of signification that makes its emotion clearly identifiable: as in the spectator’s terror-charged “gasp for breath,” interior emotion is given a corresponding, highly legible form, often the overwrought spectacle of a transparently emotive body placed within a broader affective scenario that further reveals and reinforces the emotion. The spectator’s responsive body becomes an additional corresponding and transparent form, proof of proper identification *of* and *with* the victim’s interior feelings.

Sentimentality’s privileged mode of spectacular identification overlaps with that we have seen in conceptualizations of sympathy and sensibility. Much like Adam Smith’s paradigmatic example of “our brother . . . upon the rack,” used to model

sympathy at the height of its effect, the gallows here allows for little representational and responsive wiggle room, violently forcing an alignment between the affective scenario, signifying bodies, and interior emotional content.¹⁶ Where Smith's hyperbolically constrictive structure of the rack provides a scenario that pins the victim's signifying body into an extremely visible and legible place with a limited range of likely emotional responses, virtually ensuring terror and suffering as both the victim's and spectator's near-identical responses, Thackeray's gallows goes further, envisioning an affective structure so clear and coercive that the victim's signifying body need not even be present for the scenario to grab the spectator's eyes, heart and throat. His illustration's strikingly empty and minimally detailed gallows reinforces the sense of automatic and universal effect, as if any body easily could be inserted into the barest outline of its emotional grasp.¹⁷ Thackeray's representation of the gallows forcefully conveys that, like sympathy, sentimentality presents an overwhelming affective demand on the individual. In "Going to See a Man Hanged," the rational self is imagined as invaded by a "dumb electric shock," defying language and thought, while the individualized self seems doomed to blend indistinctly into the scenario's universalizing spectacle and the other spectators forming a similarly responsive crowd. Throughout the essay, Thackeray's attention is divided between the towering gallows and the "dense" mob of spectators, ominously increasing in size and closing in around him as the time of the execution approaches.

¹⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 11.

¹⁷ Alison Byerly points out that the illustrated gallows is "not an elaborate, cross-hatched engraving like most of Thackeray's illustrations, but a dark, geometric blot that arrests the reader's eye just as its original had arrested Thackeray's" to "bring us into the text with him" (56). While Byerly reads the gallows and execution as a broader figure for aesthetic spectacle, she focuses on a binary distinction between theatricality and antitheatricality that she traces through Thackeray's works, arguing that Thackeray's stark revelations of deceptive theatricality in culture undercut its illusions, creating a "tension between aesthetic spectacle and harsh reality" that makes "his readers feel befouled by the sense that they are participants in the spectacle they have just witnessed" (56, 85). Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997).

While sentimentality shares sympathy's aura of a dangerous *loss* of self in one's sensitivity to others' feelings, it more distinctively presents another anxiety, one that arises in response to an excessive *presence* of the self, in the form of emotional self-indulgence at others' expense. Thackeray's "gallows-shock" registers this aspect of sentimentality through an after-shock most striking in its evacuation of affective affinity as completely and suddenly as its initial incitement: "The shock is over in a second; and presently you examine the object before you with a certain feeling of complacent curiosity," he writes. When a capacity for critical reflection—to not only feel but "examine"—enters the sentimental scene, sentimental susceptibility rubs uncomfortably close to self-serving complacency that could become a self-indulgently detached "curiosity" regarding "the object." Thackeray's repeated staging of such disturbing oscillations, within himself and the larger crowd, between sentimental submission and a potentially callous detachment resonates with discussions of sentimentality—past and present, castigating and recuperative—which invariably tend to hinge on the issue of self-indulgence. We see this issue at work in the effort to define sentimentality's faults in the *North British Review*, which generates a string of complaints—"exaggeration of feeling, unregulated by reason, and ludicrously incommensurate with the triviality of its object"—building up to the "essential part" of "an indulgence of feeling for feeling's sake." More recently, Miriam Bailin's examination of sentimentality in Victorian culture usefully borrows a term from Dickens to cast the problem as a "selfish reference" that constantly imperiled the Victorian ideal of absolute and pure sympathetic identification. Bailin finds in sentimentality "the stringency of the Victorian standard for univocal feeling and vigilant censorship required to achieve it," exemplified when the narrator in *The Old Curiosity Shop* insists on the selflessness and purity of Little Nell's sympathy with two reunited sisters: "Let us not believe that any selfish reference—unconscious

though it might have been—to her own trials awoke this sympathy.”¹⁸ The moment captures, for Bailin, the widespread “exertions of denial” directed against “selfish reference” and employed in “a struggle to suppress or transvalue supervening obstacles to sympathetic identification (anger, hatred, and resentment, for instance) whose traces can still be felt in the outpouring of emotion that is meant to signal their absence.”¹⁹

“Selfish reference,” under various names, continues to haunt contemporary critiques and defenses of sentimentality. Deborah Knight partially attributes the “near universal condemnation” of sentimentality in contemporary philosophy and aesthetic theory to its perceived “self-directedness”: “For according to the standard view, what marks sentimentality as a perversion of the rational self is the pleasure derived by the sentimentalist in her indulgence of her own emotions. The perversity is the self-directedness of her response, the idea that whatever the situation that prompts the response—the response thus prompted is one that indulges or pleases the sentimentalist.”²⁰ Such self-directed emotional indulgence becomes associated with an emotional hardening where others are concerned. As Knight notes, “In the end, according to the standard view, sentimentality desensitizes: it transforms the aesthetic into the anesthetic.”²¹

Robert C. Solomon’s “In Defense of Sentimentality” makes “self-consciousness” an operative term, which he invokes to negotiate the two-pronged attacks on sentimentality—common both in the philosophical tradition and in broader cultural discourse—as excessively self-effacing *and* self-indulgent. On the one hand, he attempts to infuse sentimentality with a level of self-consciousness that positions it

¹⁸ Bailin, 1021.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1020, 1022.

²⁰ Knight, 411-20.

²¹ Ibid., 417.

as more active, rational, and self-reflexive than is often allowed. But he acknowledges how, on the other hand, this self-preserving analytic awareness can give sentimentality a self-referential quality that opens it up to accusations of self-indulgence and false emotion. Solomon quotes Milan Kundera's powerful articulation of such imputation in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch."²² Responding to such charges, Solomon conceptualizes sentimentality as having a level of self-conscious reflection that can be kept distinct from necessary self-indulgence. He asks, "Is the 'second tear' self-indulgence, or is it, in philosophical circles, what would normally be called simple 'reflection,' the precondition of 'the examined life'? Why should reflection be tearless, unless we are wedded to an indefensible divorce between reason and the passions, the latter wholly self-absorbed and without reason, the former a merely 'ideal spectator,' wholly dispassionate and wholly without feeling?"²³ Solomon tenuously balances these two strands of his defense of sentimentality—sentimentality conceptualized as analytically self-reflective, but not necessarily *solipsistically* self-reflective—and in so doing, highlights the value of an emotion that would combine emotional self-consciousness with an irrepressible responsiveness to others. As we will see, this is a value that shame, in its aesthetic interactions with sentimentality, offers in Thackeray's writing.

The air of the cheap and fake that lingers about sentimentality emanates in part from a suspicion of self-indulgence masquerading as selfless identification, but it also

²² As qtd. in Solomon, 225.

²³ *Ibid.*, 238. Solomon makes a similar argument, using his dual inflection of "self-consciousness" to characterize sentimentality, when he notes that "excessive self-consciousness of one's emotions may well lead to the suspicion that an emotion is overly controlled or 'faked,' but as I pointed out (with reference to Kundera), emotional self-consciousness is not itself fraudulent but rather an important philosophical virtue" (239).

responds to the conventionality required to produce sentimentality's spectacular identification. The sudden shift in Thackeray's "gallows-shock," from terrified recognition to "complacent curiosity," highlights the instability of an affective structure of signification whose refined codification might just as easily strain as guarantee its effect. An anecdote makes clear that the crowd's persistent movements between terror and unresponsiveness reflect an anxiety over the effects of repetitive and potentially rote aesthetic conventions:

J.S.—, the famous wit, now dead, had, I recollect, a good story upon the subject of executing, and of the terror which the punishment inspires. After Thistlewood and his companions were hanged, their heads were taken off, according to the sentence, and the executioner, as he severed each, held it up to the crowd, in the proper orthodox way, saying, "Here is the head of a traitor!" At the sight of the first ghastly head the people were struck with terror, and a general expression of disgust and fear broke from them. The second head was looked at also with much interest, but the excitement regarding the third head diminished. When the executioner had come to the last of the heads, he lifted it up, but by some clumsiness, allowed it to drop. At this the crowd yelled out, "*Ah, Butter-fingers!*" the excitement had passed entirely away. The punishment had grown to be a joke—Butter-fingers was the word—a pretty commentary, indeed upon the august nature of public executions, and the awful majesty of the law. (155)

Here, the codification of objects (the decapitated head), gestures (the head raised aloft) and words (the verbal accompaniment, in the "proper orthodox way," of "Here is the head of a traitor!") makes the intended emotional effect instantly legible but also threatens to make it feel overly contrived and manipulative. Thus the crowd's pliable emotive response of terror quickly—seeming inevitably—degenerates into not just unconcern but active contempt—the collective call of "Butter-fingers." Thackeray's anecdote points up the formal challenge for a narrative invested in sentimental signification: how to incite both knowing recognition of conventions and an affectively charged investment in them, all the while avoiding aesthetic "clumsiness"?

The problem of sentimental convention relates to a broader challenge that inflects Thackeray's engagement with sentimentality, that of sustaining the effects of

the sentimental spectacle over time. Sentimentality is often characterized by an embodied immediacy which can produce—for better or worse—an intense, visceral sense of relationality. Many recent critics view this embodied immediacy as one of sentimentality's greatest assets, as when June Howard emphasizes sentimentality's function "as embodied thought that animates cognition with the recognition of the self's engagement; as sympathy, firmly based in the observer's body and imaginatively linking it to another's."²⁴ Thackeray approaches the possibilities of such immediate, bodily effect from the perspective of the creator as well as the witness of a sentimental spectacle, recognizing it as a powerful moral and aesthetic tool. But sentimentality's immediacy also aggravates the conceptual difficulty of reconciling sentimentality with active, sustained thought and retrospective reflection. Thinking, it would seem, takes time: Kundera and Solomon, accordingly, both imagine the sequential temporality of the "second tear" of self-consciousness, whether it is considered indulgent or simply reflective. The instant acuteness of sentimentality also threatens to make it short-lived: Thackeray's fine-tuned "gallows-shock" thus comes with the expiration date of a mere "second." The difficulty of sustaining sentimental effect over time stems partially from the incompatibility of mixed, accumulating or wavering feelings with the rigorous formal and relational requirements of spectacular identification. By such rigid standards, sentimental identification, once disrupted, seems gone; hence the unnerving temporal proximity of terrified pity and its complete absence throughout the essay. Thackeray focuses on the difficulty of not just sustaining but repeating sentimental effect, since its signifying conventions facilitate repetition through an emotional clarity which could repel the spectator, especially if its codified workings are laid too bare.

While the essay's first instance of "gallows-shock" invokes sentimentality's

²⁴ Howard, 77.

moving effect and its affective and formal complications, both become more pressing when the time of the execution—and thus Thackeray’s task to represent it—arrives. Thackeray depicts a feminized frenzy collectively gripping the crowd as all expect the appearance of Courvoisier, the man to be hanged: “As the clock began to strike, an immense sway and movement swept over the whole of that vast dense crowd. They were all uncovered directly, and a great murmur arose, more awful, *bizarre*, and indescribable than any sound I have ever heard before. Women and children began to shriek horribly” (156). Against this crowd, the “scaffold . . . tenantless and black” juts back into view, with its physically and affectively menacing “black chain . . . hanging down ready from the beam” (156). However, when the structure actually ensnares Courvoisier, Thackeray does not succumb so completely, and shame permeates the distance established between both himself and the sentimental spectacle of the hanging, and himself and the “sway” of the “vast dense” crowd. Thackeray pairs Courvoisier’s advance toward the gallows with his own turn away:

He went and placed himself at once under the beam, with his face toward St. Sepulchre’s. The tall grave man in black twisted him round swiftly in the other direction, and, drawing from his pocket a night-cap, pulled it tight over the patient’s head and face. I am not ashamed to say that I could look no more, but shut my eyes as the last dreadful act was going on which sent this wretched guilty soul into the presence of God. (156)

Sentimentality’s mode of spectacular identification collides, here, with a different affective mode of spectacularly disrupted identification. By closing his eyes, Thackeray interrupts sentimentality’s visual mechanism of direct, mimetic emotional transmission. The closed eyes, though, interrupt without rupturing his emotional connection to the victim, still bespeaking an intense, lingering investment that refuses to render Courvoisier a mere “object” of “complacent curiosity.” Thackeray’s suddenly blackened view, resembling, yet distinct from, the victim’s own, provides an alternative form of embodied affinity with the victim’s experience: unlike

Courvoisier's passive submission to the "night-cap," Thackeray actively shuts his eyes in a gesture of simultaneous sympathy and differentiation. His disrupted identification with Courvoisier has its own spectacular quality. Asserting "that I am not ashamed to say that I could look no more," he broaches his own potentially shameful exposure as one who stands out in a crowd of rapt onlookers. Shame circles around acts of looking *and* telling—what Thackeray is and is "not ashamed to say"—marking his narration of not looking as a further self-exposure that replaces the withheld sight of the execution for his readers. Shame, here, extends a more malleable grasp than the coercive sentimental pull of the gallows, as Thackeray recognizes that he approximates a spectacle of shame yet maintains distance from it, claiming that he is, in fact, "not ashamed."

Thackeray more fully embraces shame when his narrative subsequently switches focus from his experience of the public execution to his memory of it. While "not ashamed to say that I could look no more" at the moment of execution, Thackeray "must confess," almost immediately following the statement, that "the sight has left on my mind an extraordinary feeling of terror and shame" (156). Blending "terror and shame" into "an extraordinary feeling" enables an intermingling of the visceral impact of the "sight" with the workings of the "mind" over time—workings that can accommodate mixed feelings, accumulating reflections, and lasting impressions. Thackeray positions shame as alleviating full-fledged terror without transforming it into unfeeling detachment. In the essay's concluding paragraph, shame further bridges the temporal gap between experience and reflective representation and the affective gap between "mawkish sentiment" and callous analysis:

This is the 20th of July, and I may be permitted for my part to declare that, for the last fourteen days, so salutary has the impression of the butchery been upon me, I have had the man's face continually before my eyes; that I can see Mr.

Ketch at this moment, with an easy air, taking the rope from his pocket; that I feel myself ashamed and degraded at the brutal curiosity which took me to that brutal sight; and that I pray to Almighty God to cause this disgraceful sin to pass from among us, and to cleanse our land of blood. (158)

On the one hand, Thackeray gestures at completely disavowing the “brutal sight”—a violent disavowal motivated by his sense of degradation and “disgraceful sin.” But, on the other hand, the sense of shame that he espouses—and models for the reader’s own temporally and textually mediated experience of the sight—allows him tentatively to gesture at the linguistic re-circulation of the sight as actually have some use. When Thackeray earlier reports on asking the “philosopher in the ragged elbows” in the crowd, who has seen many executions, “whether the sight of them did any good,” the response emphasizes less the spectacle itself than its emotional aftermath: “For the matter of that, no; people did not care about them at all; nobody ever thought of it a bit after.” In the essay’s conclusion, Thackeray returns to the fraught sentimental sight, to think *and* care about it more than “a bit after.” Haunted by the extremes of a horrifically static, sentimental image of “the man’s face continually before my eyes” and the equally horrid reduction of it to a mere disposable object of “brutal curiosity,” Thackeray declares that “I feel myself ashamed and degraded,” rhetorically proffering the victim’s suffering “face” as well as his own shamed “eyes” to make a lasting—yet less sentimentally fixed—emotional impression of shame on his reading audience.

The theorists of shame who have figured most prominently in my introduction and discussion of Austen help to distinguish shame’s mode of spectacularly disrupted identification both from absolute identification and from contempt, in ways that usefully illuminate attributes of shame that speak to the problematics of sentimentality. When Silvan Tomkins defines shame as “the incomplete reduction of interest or joy,” he uses its incomplete quality to differentiate shameful reduction of

interest in a person or object from contemptuous detachment.²⁵ “Shame-humiliation,” he argues, “is the negative affect linked with love and identification, and contempt-disgust the negative affect linked with individuation and hate. Both affects are impediments to intimacy and communion, within the self and between the self and others. But shame-humiliation does not renounce the object permanently, whereas contempt-disgust does.”²⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly conceptualizes shame’s function as a “disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication.”²⁷ By emphasizing that “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity,” that it “both derives from and aims toward sociability,” Sedgwick focuses on the visceral, spectacular quality of shame’s self-making relationality, particularly positioning it to negotiate solipsism and self-effacement (36). Or, to recast her theory more directly in relation to the ongoing debates on sentimentality that we have considered, shame’s self-consciousness has a compelling, embodied effect akin to sentimentality’s immediacy but especially resistant to extremes of “selfish reference” or sympathetic loss of self.

Such resistance can be located in what Sedgwick terms “the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality,” as it “mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality” (37, 38). For Sedgwick, one strand of shame’s self-making theatricality is its disruption of strong identification, a disruption that is “itself a form of communication” that dramatically performs the distinct self for others. Thus, “blazons of shame, the ‘fallen face’ with eyes down and head averted . . . are semaphores of trouble and at the same time a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” (36).

²⁵ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition*, vol. 2. *The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 2008), 353.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003). Further references will appear in the text.

Philip Fisher similarly notes shame's constitutive sensitivity to others as setting it apart from many other emotions; contrary to the common "power of the passions to extinguish the reality and claims of others while creating . . . an almost painfully pressing awareness of the self," he observes that "the very premise of shame is the acute feeling of the reality of others and of their opinions."²⁸ Sedgwick's concept of shame's performativity emphasizes the sense of an individualized self within shame's intense relationality: shame entails both a theatrical performance of disconnection—one insistently performed for another—and a performative act that self-referentially creates the self. In Sedgwick's discussion, shame's "peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating" force involves not only directly shamed subjects but those who witness another's shame, or even sense the shame that another *should* be feeling, since shame "can so readily flood me—assuming I'm a shame-prone person—with this sensitivity whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable" (37).

For Thackeray, shame addresses not only the problems of locating an relational individualized self in sentimentality, but also the challenges posed by sentimentality's uneasy relation to narrative convention and temporality. The potent contagion of shame depends, much like sentimentality, on the legibility of its signification: to feel oneself shamed or to sense or demand another's shame entails recognizing the conventions—of behavior, speech, appearance, and so forth—being shamefully violated. To be shameless is, thus, to misconstrue or actively flout social norms. Shame departs from sentimentality, however, in this reliance on the foregrounded transgression of conventions to produce its emotional effect. Shame's contagious charge sparks from a recognized deviation from convention rather than static repetition of it. And while shame's affective illumination of deviation can serve to

²⁸ Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 60.

repressively or violently reinscribe norms, it can also self-consciously rework established conventions—it can work *with* conventions, rather than work completely within or without them. Shame can, accordingly, shape exposed convention through affectively fueled revision rather than stale repetition or contemptuous mockery. Shame does this work in part by attending to the problem of sentimentality’s conventionally repeating emotional effect and, more generally, the difficulty of integrating strong, embodied feelings into passing time. The immediate visceral impact of shame—perhaps best captured by the blush—also has a particularly narrative quality, in the sense that shame is often the result of a temporal sequence and retrospection. Fisher highlights this temporal structure when he distinguishes shame from other passions such as anger, fear, grief, and wonder through its common role as a “successor passion” and an “aftermath state” that follows other passions (53, 65). Acting as a successor passion, shame often serves as a “meta-feeling,” a feeling about previous feelings that remembers, reviews, and revalues them.²⁹ In this way, Thackeray uses shame to enfold fleeting moments of sentimentality into narratives of passing time and retrospective memory, while also encasing sentimental moments within shame’s equally emotive—rather than emotionally drained—reflective meta-

²⁹ I borrow the term “meta-feeling” from Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 31. While shame is not one of Ngai’s ugly feelings, her discussion of their meta-feeling function resonates with shame’s common reflexivity on other feelings. It is worth noting that shame is also included in one of her examples of how a meta-feeling might function, in what appears to be the more reflexive position: “the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of ‘I feel ashamed about feeling envious’ or ‘I feel anxious about my enviousness’) that significantly parallels the doubleness on which irony, as an evaluative stance hinging on a relationship between the said and the unsaid, fundamentally depends. In their tendency to promote what Susan Feagin calls ‘meta-responses’ (since it is hard to feel envy without feeling that one should *not* be feeling envy, reinforcing the negativity of the original emotion), there is a sense in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to or promoting ironic distance in a way that grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not” (10). While Ngai associates the “reflexive response” of a meta-feeling with “ironic distance,” contrasting it with the “moral emotions associated with sentimental literature,” in my reading of shame as a meta-feeling on sentimentality, shame’s close, yet reflexive, relation to sentimentality could be considered akin to an “ironic distance” from sentimentality, but not an opposing contrast, since this distance is not as extreme as the distance established by something like ironic contempt.

commentary on sentimentality's affective and formal immediacy.

It is around the figure of the reader, especially, that sentimentality's visceral effect and shame's revisionary reflection coalesce into Thackeray's distinctively self-conscious style. While Thackeray models his own shame—as witness and narrator—as an alternative vantage onto the sentimental spectacle in “Going to See a Man Hanged,” he also directly figures the reader as an additional, embodied shameful spectacle. At the key moment in the essay, when the narrator confesses his “extraordinary feeling of terror and shame,” he also comes “face to face with the reader” in a striking instance of direct address. We have already considered this moment in part; returning to it now, in its entirety, illustrates how the technique of direct address that most critics consider central to Thackeray's novelistic self-consciousness also proves central to his shameful negotiation of sentimentality. Upon admitting that he “could look no more” at the execution, Thackeray turns not only away from the gallows, but toward the reader, asking:

How does an individual man feel under it—In what way does he observe it,—how does he view all the phenomena connected with it,—what induces him, in the first instance, to go and see it,—and how is he moved by it afterwards? The writer has discarded the magazine “We” altogether, and spoken face to face with the reader, recording every one of the impressions felt by him as honestly as he could.

I must confess, then (for “I” is the shortest word, and the best in this case), that the sight has left on my mind an extraordinary feeling of terror and shame. (156)

A number of characteristic features of Thackeray's literary direct address combine, here, to render both narrator and reader shamefully self-conscious. Thackeray's direct address, “spoken face to face” to the reader, rhetorically intensifies the contagious potential of his own shame by mutually exposing himself and the reader with “the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality.” The workings of the narrator's and reader's “individual” minds are displayed along with the image of each “face”: the highlighted use of an “I”—rather

than “We”—combines with the questions’ form and content to rhetorically conjure the individualized perceptions, feelings and thoughts of both narrator and reader. Even as it is invoked, however, the immediacy of the stark display of face and mind is mediated by foregrounded, intervening layers of text and time, reinforcing both shame as a meta-feeling and its “double movement” of spectacularly disrupted identification. Thackeray emphasizes the temporal disjunction between moments of experience (how “an individual man feel[s] under it”) and of memory (how he “is moved by it afterwards”), and further highlights the temporal gap between processes of writing and reading. By casting the narrator specifically as a “writer” and the narratee as a magazine “reader,” while also highlighting the linguistic conventions that determine their exchange, Thackeray lays bare individualized experience, but also the discrete scenes—and temporalities—of textual production and consumption. The reader is thus both particularly unveiled—caught in the act of reading—and self-reflexively reminded of the temporal and textual distance that reading maintains from the sentimental event and even from the writer who has “spoken face to face with the reader” only through magazine print. The critical commonplace of Thackeray’s extreme self-consciousness heavily stresses his emotionally detached, literary self-consciousness: but here we see one, formative example of how such self-consciousness can position writer and reader as both acutely shamefaced *and* self-reflexively aware of this embodiment as a textual construction.

ANALYTIC TEARS

When Thackeray castigates the “drivelling hysterical sentimentality” of popular paintings in his art criticism, he does concede, albeit facetiously, that “the great geniuses who invented them have not, you see, toiled in vain,” since “they can command the sympathies of the public.” The potential vanity of sentimentality

becomes a much graver matter, however, in Thackeray's attempt to "command the sympathies of the public" as author and illustrator of *Vanity Fair*. As the title suggests, vanity is the novel's dominant trope. In detangling vanity's intricate formal and conceptual strands, it is useful to view it as, in part, a thematized emotional problem—indeed the very problem that, as we have seen, underlies recent criticism's sense of a sharp break between sentimentality and critical detachment in *Vanity Fair*. As in "Going to See a Man Hanged," Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* focuses on this worrisome emotional binary, invoking shame to counter sentimentality's haunting vanity.

The sentimental letter especially consolidates the social and aesthetic dilemmas of sentimentality in *Vanity Fair*. The sentimental relic whose time has passed, but refuses to disappear, persistently features in the plot and in the narrator's direct address to the reader. At one point, the narrator laments the horrific metamorphosis of a letter, "written in the period of love and confidence" by "a dear friend," into the "vehement protests of dead affection," "lying epitaphs over the corpse of love." "What dark, cruel comments upon Life and Vanities!" he concludes. "Most of us have got or written drawers full of them. They are closet-skeletons which we keep and shun" (353). Sentimentality's threatening allure in the novel emanates from its abiding presence as something "we keep and shun": it might be critically revealed as—and through—"dark, cruel comments," but it cannot be put to rest. In another of the narrator's asides on the ghostly lingering of sentimental letters, Thackeray highlights many of the same features of sentimentality that plague him in "Going to See a Man Hanged," while also placing them in a more specifically novelistic context. Here, the narrator intrudes his own "dark, cruel comments" to demystify sentimental illusions:

Perhaps in *Vanity Fair* there are no better satires than letters. Take a bundle of your dear friend's of ten years back—your dear friend whom you hate now.

Look at a file of your sister's: how you clung to each other till you quarreled about the twenty pound legacy! Get down the round-hand scrawls of your son who has half broken your heart with selfish undutifulness since; or a parcel of your own, breathing endless ardour and love eternal, which were sent back by your mistress when she married the Nabob—your mistress for whom you now care no more than for Queen Elizabeth. Vows, love, promises, confidences, gratitude, how queerly they read after a while! There ought to be a law in Vanity Fair ordering the destruction of every written document (except receipted tradesmen's bills) after a certain brief and proper interval. Those quacks and misanthropes who advertise indelible Japan ink, should be made to perish along with their wicked discoveries. The best ink for Vanity Fair use would be one that faded utterly in a couple of days, and left the paper clean and blank, so that you might write on it to somebody else. (191-92)

The contrast of “indelible” and disappearing ink captures the emotional bind of a sentimental over-investment which, at the slightest disruption, risks complete evaporation, replaced by disdain or disregard: those who once “clung to each other” “hate now,” or, perhaps even worse, “now care no more than for Queen Elizabeth.” Sentimentality's indelible ink connotes a disturbing stasis in its affective mode of strict identification and idealization, but the alternative “destruction” appears equally static—if not by leaving “the paper clean and blank,” by producing an inevitable, vain repetitious cycle in which one “might write on it to somebody else” to similar results. Both the “indelible” letter and “the paper clean and blank,” destined for endless recycling, lack the capacity for an affective accumulation which can accommodate mixed feelings and shifting perceptions of the self and others. Passing time again threatens sentimentality's effectiveness, as sentimental absorption is allowed only “a certain brief and proper interval,” and is portrayed as best suited to a system of signification “that fade[s] utterly in a couple of days,” along with the feeling. The mere “couple of days” accorded before the emotional “blank” suggests for sentimental investment and detachment an unnerving temporal proximity, as if the loss of one must immediately usher in the other. The narrator's staging of contemptuous rereadings of sentimental letters—rereadings which would prefer a “paper clean and blank”—especially points up the resistance to retrospective reflection and revision of a

sentimental mode intent on “breathing endless ardour and love eternal” in a stagnant form.

Thackeray’s conceit of letters and ink positions this emotional problem in a particularly literary vein. The letters of *Vanity Fair*, and “how queerly they read after a while,” raise concerns about both sentimental absorption and critical detachment as forms of literary engagement that can stand the test of time, whether it be the time of reading a lengthy novel or, more abstractly, of literary history. The figure of the letter stresses questions of specifically novelistic engagement: “a bundle of your dear friend’s” letters resonates with both the tradition of sentimental epistolary novels and the more contemporary trend of monthly serial publication, which Thackeray adopted for *Vanity Fair*’s initial run. This association of letters and novel form is reinforced elsewhere in *Vanity Fair*: the narrator begins “Quite a Sentimental Chapter” by quoting complaints about the novel thus far which he has received from “some unknown correspondent,” comically referencing the type of reader feedback between numbers that publication in serial parts could allow, and portraying it as contentious epistolary exchange (115). Thackeray also directly parodies sentimental epistolary novels in early chapters, especially in Becky Sharp’s letters to “MY DEAREST, SWEETEST AMELIA,” with their pointed allusions to the work of Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney. The possible failure of letters in the world of *Vanity Fair* to sustain or accumulate emotional interest over time thus threatens to extend to *Vanity Fair*, as a novel plumbing sentimentality’s capacity to create affective continuity and legibility between serial parts and with existing literary conventions. In this light, the stain of sentimentality’s “indelible” letters, marked for imminent “destruction,” suggests the menacing shadow of merely repetitive sentimental convention or its parodic collapse, each seen as possibly failing to revise, or even effectively reuse, novel form.

The sentimental keepsake might seem destined, in *Vanity Fair*, to be either emotively static or affectively drained, but a significant alternative appears in the novel—the shameful letter. George Osborne’s love note, given to Becky on the eve of Waterloo, and much later given by Becky to Amelia to prove George’s unfaithfulness—arguably the most important letter in the novel’s plot—becomes such a shameful letter. It does not begin as such: on its initial delivery, to Becky, the letter makes material the problematic coexistence of extreme sentimental absorption and detachment. It marks both the height of George’s deluded romantic vulnerability to Becky’s charms, which yields only her contemptuous mockery of his foolishness, and also George’s own long-standing emotional insensitivity toward his wife’s feelings, most comically portrayed in the illustration of “Lieutenant Osborne and his ardent love letters,” in which he callously uses Amelia’s deluded, lovelorn missives to him to light his cigar (135). However, the love note’s greatest impact occurs when Becky recirculates it years later by handing it over to Amelia, to break George’s posthumous sentimental spell over her. The letter accrues rather than loses emotional effect as the plot moves from George’s initial writing toward this climactic conclusion, and as the letter absorbs various characters’ shame. Functioning as a multi-faceted signifier of shame, the love letter repeatedly intercedes in characters’ tendencies toward extreme indulgence in or detachment from sentimentality. In George’s case, the letter quickly morphs into a regret—a wish for “that night’s work undone”—that produces a rare and fleeting responsiveness to Amelia’s sentimental appeal as he stands “heart-stained, and shame-stricken” over her sleeping form (292). Becky’s imperviousness to sentimentality is also briefly broken down by the possible emergence of the letter as a memento of her shame. Upon finding Amelia crazed with worry during the battle of Waterloo, Becky’s thoughts that “she must have seen him give me the letter at the ball” trigger the emotional responsiveness of “looking down” and “hanging down her

head” (309). Becky is uncharacteristically “touched in spite of herself” by Amelia’s emotive display, a potent mixture of accusatory shaming (culminating in “For shame, Rebecca; bad and wicked woman—false friend and false wife”) and histrionic suffering much more effective than Amelia’s typical sentimental entreaty (309). And while sparks of shame fanned by the letter increase Amelia’s affective pull on those usually immune to her sentimental spectacles, they also disrupt her own excessive sentimentality. Years after George’s death, the long forgotten note reemerges in Becky’s mind, no longer signaling the unwelcome display of her own shame as much as the need to incite Amelia’s, to intervene in Amelia’s continuing, morbid idealization of her late husband and resulting cruel undervaluation of her suitor, Dobbin. Observing the would-be lovers quarrel, Becky muses, “What a noble heart that man has . . . and how shamefully that woman plays with it,” then “she absolutely bethought herself of something”—the letter that could be shown to Amelia to expose her shamefully sentimental delusions about George (670).

Amelia’s possible shaming through George’s love note takes on particular significance in contrast to her sentimental hoarding of his love tokens addressed to her. Prior to their marriage, when she believes their engagement to be permanently broken, Amelia’s rereading of his old love letters epitomizes vainly repetitive, resuscitative sentimental reading practices. George’s letters, in this context, incarnate the narrator’s trope of “the relics and remembrances of dead affection . . . the corpse of Love” (182). Rather than contemptuously repudiate the letters, Amelia strains at revival as she constantly reviews the letters alone in her bedroom:

She drew them out of the place where she kept them; and read them over—as if she did not know them by heart already: for she could not part with them. The effort was too much for her; she placed them back in her bosom again—as you have seen a woman nurse a child that is dead. . . . If they were cold, yet how perversely this fond little soul interpreted them into warmth. If they were short and selfish, what excuses she found for the writer! It was over these few worthless papers that she brooded and brooded. (182)

Amelia's plight takes the bind of sentimental letters to a horrific extreme, as her sentimentality appears to be not just nursing the fading affective material of the letters but "perversely" birthing a "warmth" that was negligible from the start. The letters thus bear the "selfish" traces of George's callous self-absorption, but also of Amelia's own "perversely" solipsistic self-indulgence, doomed to "worthless" emotional exhaustion. A deathly rupture gapes between the "short and selfish" letters of detachment and the excessively emotive, yet equally "selfish," interpretive attempts to breath affective life into a "corpse of Love." The vanity of both George's callous signification and Amelia's sentimental reading highlights the need for an alternative letter, one that can mediate between these emotional extremes by intervening in both the writer's form and the reader's response. That such a "letter" might take the shape of an emotive, feminized spectacle is suggested when the narrator proffers the sight of Amelia's suffering, through direct address, to "you," to be interpreted "as you have seen a woman nurse a child that is dead." The reader is confronted with a pathetically moving sight, even as the spectacle displays the risk of overly sentimental response. Thackeray's direct address thus highlights the danger of the reader being similarly compelled to "nurse a child that is dead"—a danger negotiated, as the novel continues, through the circulation of shameful letters that take epistolary, figuratively embodied, and direct-address forms.

If Amelia's "perversely . . . fond" reading condenses anxieties over the sentimental spectacle and spectator, her shame, presented as another moving spectacle and model of emotionally charged, interpretive engagement, appears particularly poised to address sentimentality's drawbacks. Much like Becky, Amelia is periodically "touched" by shame—touches that, in her case, loosen sentimentality's stranglehold. A brush with shame shortly after her wedding to George, when she visits her parents' home, briefly dislodges her all-consuming romantic idealization of

him:

What a gulf lay between her and that past life. She could look back to it from her present standing-place, and contemplate, almost as another being, the young unmarried girl absorbed in her love, having no eyes but for one special object, receiving parental affection if not ungratefully, at least indifferently, and as if it were her due—her whole heart and thoughts bent on the accomplishment of one desire. The review of those days, so lately gone yet so far away, touched her with shame, and the aspect of the kind parents filled her with tender remorse. (260)

As the idol of George wobbles, Amelia also totters at the brink of an affective chasm—“a gulf . . . between her and that past life,” aggravated by a sense of accelerated temporal distance and alienation from self and others that recalls the narrator’s fantasy of rapidly disappearing ink. Shame affectively forms for Amelia a “present standing-place” from which to “contemplate” and “review those days,” infusing her retrospective “look back” with an analytic agency and critical distance missing from her previous, compulsive recyclings “by heart” of George’s love letters. Shame also, however, helps bridge the gaping “gulf” between past and present, absorption and contemplation, and self and others created by her developing critical perspective: rather than cold indifference, the “touch” of “shame” evokes a “tender remorse” that engages “her whole heart *and* thoughts,” giving them wider berth and greater reflective self-consciousness (*italics mine*). Thackeray portrays Amelia’s shameful self-consciousness as a tenuous balance between embodied bonds and critical “review,” and between self-indulgence and a loss of the self in others: she responds emotionally to “the aspect of the kind parents” previously neglected, while simultaneously defining an earlier version of herself seen “*almost* as another being,” but still connected to her present self (*italics mine*).

The contrast—as well as potent points of contact—between Amelia’s shameful interpretive position and that of her previous sentimental letter reading gains emphasis when Amelia next moves into her old bedroom and right into “that very chair in which



Figure 2. William Makepeace Thackeray, illustration from Chapter XXVI of *Vanity Fair* (261).

she had passed so many bitter hours . . . and fell to thinking over the past week, and the life beyond it" (261). Physically sliding back into "that very chair" which supported her old posture of sentimental letter reading, Amelia precariously wavers between its "perversely . . . fond" interpretive practices and her burgeoning, shame-charged reading. This wavering is highlighted by the further description—"Here she sate, and recalled to herself fondly that image of George to which she had knelt before marriage" (261)—as well as the illustration that accompanies it, in which Thackeray depicts Amelia in the chair, looking down toward an open letter at her feet, as a maid approaches behind her (see figure 2). Her gesture of sinking into the old chair, with slightly bowed head, straddles two possible meanings: her full submission, once again, to "that image of George to which she had knelt before marriage," or her shameful revision of the past, accommodating a new relation to a sentimental image "recalled to herself fondly," but not fully reinstated.

In the first edition of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray's in-text illustration of this scene appears immediately after the phrase "that image of George to" and occupies the remainder of the page.³⁰ Thus, it is not until the following page that the ambiguity of Amelia's posture is emptied, when the narrator asserts her complete fall out of shame, and back into a morbid sentimentality the narrator asserts her complete fall out of shame, and back into a morbid sentimentality deemed "selfish brooding":

Did she own to herself how different the real man was from that superb young hero whom she had worshipped? It requires many many years—and a man must be very bad indeed—before a woman's pride and vanity will let her own to such a confession. . . . And so she sate for awhile indulging in her usual mood of selfish brooding, in that very listless melancholy attitude in which the honest maid-servant had found her, on the day when she brought up the letter in which George renewed his offer of marriage. (262)

The ambiguous emotional content of Amelia's physical pose is not the only thing clarified here: the reference to the earlier moment in the plot, when "the honest maid-servant had found her" reading George's old love letters, suggests that the illustration of Amelia approached by the maid on the preceding page actually pictures this former instance of sentimental pining, not her current return to her old bedroom. The visual image of Amelia's former reading thus takes on an eerie "indelible" quality, uncannily outlasting its proper narrative moment much like her "usual mood of selfish brooding." Her sentimental posture appears as statically coercive as "that image of George to which she had knelt before marriage"—a posture that might hold *Vanity Fair*'s reader entranced as much as George's sentimental image, and her own sentimental stances, hold Amelia. But even as the narrative explanation of the illustration ostensibly disposes of any remaining traces of a shameful alternative in Amelia's own position, direct address preserves the interpretative insights of shame in the invoked novel reader. The question—"Did she own to herself how different the

³⁰ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair, a novel without a hero. With illustrations on steel and wood by the author* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1847-48), 228.

real man was from that superb young hero whom she had worshipped?”—attributes a critical awareness of the “real man” to the addressed reader, placing this shrewd reader at a distance from the illustrated Amelia, while also aligning the reader with the fleeting discernment of her shame, discernment which the narrator implies will again, and more fully, be realized by Amelia after “many many years.” Shame opens a possible point of affective affinity between the emotive woman of the illustration and the savvy reader of the narrative address—between, more broadly, sentimental image and self-conscious letter.

The shame that accumulates throughout the novel around sentimental tokens most fully mediates between excessive sentimental investment and critical detachment when George’s love letter to Becky is once more delivered—passed on to Amelia near the end of *Vanity Fair*, yielding its most pronounced and productive shaming effect. Here, “The letter before Waterloo” takes the additional form of Thackeray’s illustration of Amelia’s response to the letter, an illustration paired with narration, directly addressed to the reader, of the pictured moment (see figure 3). “The Letter before Waterloo” exemplifies Thackeray’s concerns over sentimentality, concerns particularly manifest in the novel’s sentimental letters and feminized bodies. In the accompanying narration, both become the material, not of contemptuous repudiation, but of Thackeray’s shameful recirculation, which seeks, through self-conscious direct address, to negotiate sentimentality’s affective and formal binds.

Considered on its own, the illustration “The letter before Waterloo” stages a highly sentimental set piece. The conventional trappings of sentimentality’s spectacular identification are in place: the visibly overwrought body of a suffering woman is reinforced by plentiful pathetic gestures and signals—a clutched letter, a covered face, and a dark shadow cast over the cherished portraits of her late husband and her son. Within Victorian conventions for codified rhetorical gestures, Amelia’s



Figure 3. William Makepeace Thackeray, "The letter before Waterloo," *Vanity Fair* (681).

pose is especially legible as the suffering of shame. Her posture reproduces the hanging of the head and covered eyes associated with shame in popular acting and rhetorical guidebooks, particularly resembling the illustration of "a female expression" of "shame in the extreme" in Gilbert Austin's popular nineteenth-century treatise on rhetorical delivery (see figure 4).³¹ In Austin's listing of significant gestures for "The Head and Face" and "The Hands," he notes that "[t]he hanging down of the head denotes shame or grief" and "[t]he hand on the head indicates pain or distress. On the eyes, shame."³² In an acting manual influential throughout the nineteenth century, Henry Siddons similarly argues that "To veil and cover up the face . . . is equally the sign of shame and modesty"; he additionally describes common manifestations of a shamed person: "He hangs his head on his breast; his neck stiffens,

³¹ Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia, or A treatise on rhetorical delivery* . . . (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1806), 489, figure 108.

³² *Ibid.*, 482, 484.



Figure 4. “Shame,” from Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia, or A treatise on rhetorical delivery* . . . (489, figure 108).

as it were, to resist any effort to lift up his head; and he either averts his timid eyes, or conceals them under his eyelids.”³³ While Amelia’s body follows such convention in signifying shame, it is shame deployed sentimentally, in the sense that its representation goes to various sentimental extremes. Amelia’s hunched posture and dangling arm portray her shame and grief as overwhelming and immediate. The primary reliance on a conventional, visual posture to convey emotions also lessens their ambiguity. The conventional visual form further creates a temporal limitation, a formal difficulty of portraying Amelia’s feeling developing or changing over narrative time, that gives it a particularly fixed quality. Formally emphasizing these sentimental qualities in the illustration, by depicting shame not just visually, but conventionally and excessively, Thackeray highlights the challenges of sentimentality, not as a specifically visual form, but more broadly as an affective structure focused on spectacular identification.

³³ Henry Siddons, *Practical illustrations of rhetorical gesture and action; adapted to the English drama: from a work on the subject by M. Engel*, 2d ed. (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1822), 6, 174.



Contempt.

Figure 5. “Contempt,” from Henry Siddons, *Practical illustrations of rhetorical gesture and action* (39).

Thackeray problematizes sentimentality in “The letter before Waterloo” by taking it to certain extremes, and he further critiques it by including a discordant feature within the sentimental frame: Becky’s clearly non-identifying presence as she looks at Amelia’s emotive display. Becky exudes an emotion particularly resonant with the illustration of contempt in Siddons’ acting manual—a contempt apparent by the conventions of rhetorical gestures (see figure 5).³⁴ By inserting an unambiguous figure of contempt within the system of signs otherwise orchestrated by the conventions of sentimental submission, Thackeray produces a tension within the sentimental image that points up the limits of sentimentality as a mode demanding

³⁴ The illustration is described as “a kind of pantomime, frequently resorted to by the Italian, when he wishes to express his contempt of a menace or a warning. He gently draws the back of his hand several times under his chin, and turns back his head with an ironical smile, as if deaf to the speaker, and concentrated in himself.” Becky’s pose also resembles “other marks of disdain” described elsewhere: “a glance of raillery, while the head inclines a little on one side”; “a disdainful smile, mixed with pity”; and “turning away from the person, or looking at him aside, darting a quick glance with a haughty air. Sometimes with the head turned over the shoulder, as if the object were unworthy of a more serious or attentive examination” (Siddons, 169-70).

absolute, immediate and unambiguous identification. Becky, here, seems to represent the necessary casualty—an affective rupture—of such rigid relational and formal demands on the representation of feeling. In this sense, “The letter before Waterloo” appears to function, much like the narrator’s trope of sentimental letters in the world of *Vanity Fair*, as an encapsulation of sentimentality’s basic lack of viability—an “indelible” mode destined for obsolescence and “destruction.”

However, the sentimental letter, as we have seen, does not remain an irresolvable emotional problem in *Vanity Fair*, as its supplementation by shame negotiates the seeming rupture between sentimentality and contempt. “The letter before Waterloo,” similarly, cannot be considered on its own, and lends itself to shameful revision within the larger narrative context of *Vanity Fair*. In the case of “The letter before Waterloo,” the spectacle of Amelia’s shame already appears in the sentimental image itself, emphasizing the possibility for reworking rather than merely repudiating the sentimental mode. The narration of the moment pictured in “The letter before Waterloo” takes the sentimentally deployed spectacle of shame and transforms it into a looser affective and aesthetic mode that can address sentimentality’s greatest limitations. While the illustration pushes shame toward sentimental rigidity, the narration emphasizes those aspects of shame that can preserve sentimentality’s assets—particularly its embodied, intensely relational immediacy—combined with a critical capacity for spectacularly disrupted identification, reflective temporality, and accumulating thoughts and feeling.

Initially, the narration of Amelia’s reception of the letter seems simply to duplicate the emotional dynamics of the illustration. Amelia displays passive and suspended emotional submission, while Becky appears detached from her histrionics:

Emmy’s head sank down, and for almost the last time in which she shall be called upon to weep in this history, she commenced that work. Her head fell to her bosom, and her hands went up to her eyes; and there for awhile, she gave

way to her emotions, as Becky stood on and regarded her. (680-81)

But while Becky regards from a distance, the narrator ushers the reader further into the scene, where its emotive spectacle appears a more complex matter than at first suspected:

Who shall analyze those tears, and say whether they were sweet or bitter? Was she grieved, because the idol of her life was tumbled down and shivered at her feet, or indignant that her love had been so despised, or glad because the barrier was removed which modesty had placed between her and a new, a real affection? "There is nothing to forbid me now," she thought. "I may love him with all my heart now. O, I will, I will, if he will but let me and forgive me." I believe it was this feeling rushed over all the others which agitated that gentle bosom. (681-82)

Amelia's shaming becomes the occasion for Thackeray to broach one of the central questions of sentimentality, in past and continuing debates: "Who shall analyze those tears"? If we consider "tears" in their common function as a synecdoche for the sentimental mode, the question opens onto a number of significant lines of inquiry raised in and around Thackeray's work, and in sentimentality studies more generally: Does sentimentality warrant or benefit from analysis? Can sentimentality and analysis—or, more generally, extreme emotion and rational thought—productively coexist? Is sentimentality a valid mode for self-analysis, or must it be analyzed from an outside, detached position? Thackeray, in his presentation of Amelia, as well as in his figuration of the perceptive narrator and reader through highly self-conscious direct address, pursues these questions by melding sentimentality and shame into what we might call a mode of analytic tears.

In contrast to Amelia's sentimental brooding, her sentimental "tears" here provide a vehicle for her most self-conscious, yet emotionally invested, analysis of herself and others. They become such a vehicle through her acute shame: "this feeling" that "rushed over all the others which agitated that gentle bosom," her sense that "I may love [Dobbin] . . . if he will but let me and forgive me." The passage emphasizes those aspects of shame that are downplayed in "The letter before

Waterloo,” while preserving shame’s compelling effect in the image. The narrative maintains shame’s visually engaging, embodied quality in the illustration, as Amelia physically “g[ives] way to her emotions” with bowed head and covered eyes. But the emphasis now lies on the “emotions”—wavering and accumulating, including varied feelings and “thought”—that intense shame particularly accommodates. As “this feeling rushed over all the others,” in the description, the divergent strands of “love” and grief, of feelings “glad” and “indignant,” gather in shame’s wake, accentuating its function as a meta-feeling, reflective on other emotions.

Mixing diverse feelings from her past and present, Amelia’s rush of shame also delivers on the reflective potential latent in her earlier, fleeting touches of shame. Amelia finally makes the “confession,” the assault on her own “pride and vanity,” of “how different the real man was from that superb young hero whom she had worshipped”—a confession predicted by the narrator when Amelia visits her parents’ home and her old scene of sentimental reading (262). Similar to that early incident in the novel, we have by this point seen Amelia inch toward, yet finally retreat from, such shameful insight when she quarrels with Dobbin shortly before receiving George’s letter from Becky, accusing him of unjustly tainting George by implying an indiscretion with Becky. Dobbin denies the charge: “‘Reflect, afterwards when—when you are at leisure, and your conscience will withdraw this accusation. It does even now.’ Amelia held down her head” (669). Dobbin reads the signification of Amelia’s reflective “confession” in her bowed head, but in addition to signaling her own developing critical insights, her shamed posture is portrayed, in this instance, as particularly conducive to inciting them in others. Dobbin echoes Amelia’s developing reflective stance when he interrogates his own delusive idealization of Amelia:

“It is not that speech of yesterday,” he continued, “which moves you. This is but a pretext, Amelia, or I have loved you and watched you for fifteen years in vain. Have I not learned in that time to read all your feelings, and to look into

your thoughts? I know what your heart is capable of: it can cling faithfully to a recollection, and cherish a fancy; but it can't feel such an attachment as mine deserves to mate with, and such as I would have won from a woman more generous than you. No you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you . . . you couldn't reach up to the height of the attachment which I bore you, and which a loftier soul than yours might have been proud to share." (669)

Amelia's shameful spectacle appears poised to challenge, not just for herself but for Dobbin, the threat of vain interpretation that fails to accumulate insight over time—the threat that “I have loved you and watched you for fifteen years in vain.” However, another form of vanity still plagues such accumulative insight, even if achieved: the possibility that discerning interpretation will lead to an affective rupture with the object of heightened critical scrutiny, making “fifteen years” of “lov[ing] and watch[ing]” as emotionally vacant as the unreflective alternative is critically vacant. Thus, although Dobbin believes that “I have learned in that time to read all your feelings, and to look into your thoughts,” such learning leaves little room for emotional attachment to the woman read. Instead, as a result of such learned reading, “William thus suddenly broke the chain by which she held him, and declared his independence and superiority” (670). The broken attachment portrayed, here, once again stems from a sentimental idealization that cannot be reconciled with critical insight. Amelia's continuing resistance to her own shameful self-awareness fuels Dobbin's contempt—or at least the closest he ever comes to this position—but in his contemptuous critique of Amelia he downplays his own shamefully sentimental idealization of her as well. While briefly admitting that “I was a fool, with fond fancies, too,” he still clings to the idea of the “height of the attachment” which “a loftier soul . . . might have been proud to share.” His resistance to the full shameful exposure of his own misinterpretations, even to himself, continues during (and seemingly reinforces) his brief estrangement from Amelia: his belief that his love for her is absolutely “flung down and shattered” and “destroyed” is linked, in the narration of his thoughts, to his insistence, “Why pine, or be ashamed of my defeat?”

(677). In spurning the sentimental pining of his “fond mistake” he also spurns his shame (677).

Like the trope of rereading sentimental letters, Dobbin’s desire not to “have loved you and watched you for fifteen years in vain” resonates with the dilemma of the novel reader, especially one positioned, as the reader of *Vanity Fair* is, with both foregrounded access to representations of characters’ interiorities and constant destabilizations of the transparency and reliability of such access. Thackeray’s self-conscious narration often produces, for the reader, variations of Dobbin’s question in regards to one’s grasp of characters’ “feelings” and “thoughts”—“Have I not learned in that time to read all your feelings, and to look into your thoughts?” “No,” Thackeray most often suggests, as his form of direct address regarding characters’ feelings and thoughts evokes intimate views but refuses to endorse the “independence and superiority” of the confidence that one could “read *all* your feelings” (italics mine). This refusal of complete critical access does not, however, dismissively imply the reader’s sentimental naiveté. By constantly highlighting the ambiguities, risks, and inevitable “fond mistake[s]” of literary interpretation, while balancing these mistakes with assurances of the reader’s critical acumen, the direct address of *Vanity Fair* suggests the delicate balance needed to maneuver through the Vanity Fair of interpretation, avoiding the minefields of its sentimentally absorbed and contemptuously detached extremes.

Amelia’s eventual reception of George’s letter exemplifies shame’s centrality—as literary spectacle and modeled mode of reading—in Thackeray’s negotiation of interpretive vanity through direct address. While the letter before Waterloo accrues many characters’ shame in the novel, its final address, to the novel’s reader, fashions that reader as an additional spectator and spectacle of shame. Shame exerts on the reader the contagious pull of its striking, embodied spectacle in “The

letter before Waterloo,” and the reader’s shame is further invited rhetorically through the self-conscious narration of such spectacle. The question—“Who shall analyze those tears, and say whether they were sweet or bitter?”—overlays Amelia’s spectacle of shame with the reader’s own exposure, one that, like Amelia’s, centers on processes of interpretation. The accumulation of various possible feelings and thoughts within Amelia’s shamed posture disrupts the legibility of sentimental identification, replacing it with an ambiguous spectacle of disrupted identification that extends to the reader: “Was she grieved, because the idol of her life was tumbled down and shivered at her feet, or indignant that her love had been so despised, or glad because the barrier was removed which modesty had placed between her and a new, a real affection?” This series of questions invokes the individualized workings of the narrator’s and reader’s minds, as does the narrator’s qualification of “I believe” when asserting Amelia’s dominant feeling. The reader’s exposure further involves being rhetorically “seen” in the scene of reading, inscribed there by reference to the novel itself in the narrator’s assurance that it is “almost the last time in which [Amelia] shall be called upon to weep in this history.” Here, the divergent temporalities of plot, narration, and the reading are all on display. While reinforcing the reader’s distance from the characters, narrator, and writer of “this history,” Thackeray’s foregrounded layering of temporalities also creates a powerful point of affinity—if not rigorous identification—between Amelia’s retrospective insight through shame, and that demanded from the reader. Thackeray asks the reader to look closely and responsively at Amelia’s shamed body and thoughts, and to fill in ambiguities by examining previous narrative events and the shifting perceptions of them while reading. Ultimately, it is not simply reading the shamed woman, but also reading *like* her, that offers a solution to the impasse of vain stasis or non-accumulative repetition of the sentimental letter in *Vanity Fair*.

“I SHAME TO SAY”

As Thackeray recirculates the letter before Waterloo to diverse shameful ends in *Vanity Fair*, it is important to recognize the agent of its dramatic redelivery within the plot: Becky Sharp. Becky’s masterfully orchestrated revelation of “how shamefully” Amelia has acted represents the apex of her remarkable career in shaming effects. The incident also marks a reversal of an exchange in the novel’s opening sequence, in which Becky and Amelia depart from Miss Pinkerton’s academy to enter “the world . . . before the two young ladies” (9). In response to an onslaught of bad behavior on Becky’s part—flinging “Johnson’s Dictionary” out the departing carriage’s window, mocking the Misses Pinkerton, and rebelliously crying “Vive la France, Vive l’Empereur, *Vive Bonaparte!*”—Amelia attempts a shaming that falls decidedly flat:

“Oh Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame,” cried Miss Sedley. . . . “How can you have such wicked and revengeful thoughts?”

“Revenge may be wicked but it’s natural,” answered Miss Rebecca. “I’m no angel”—and to say the truth she certainly was not. (10)

From the novel’s first pages, shame suggestively hovers between the two protagonists, as a possible—and clearly yet to be realized—mediator of their relationship with each other, with others, and with “the world.” Thackeray also indicates, from the start, which specific qualities of each character might need mediating: Amelia is introduced as a sentimental “silly thing,” while Becky is characterized by her “hard-heartedness” (5, 11). We have seen these two emotional poles figured by the “indelible” and disappearing ink of the sentimental letter, and by the incompatible postures of Amelia and Becky in “The letter before Waterloo”: the overall structure of *Vanity Fair*, with its parallel plots centered on Amelia and Becky, respectively, similarly thematizes the fraught points of contact and divergence between sentimentality and contemptuous detachment, and depicts both protagonists’ significant relations to shame as the novel explores it as an alternative affective mode. Just as Amelia’s growing sensitivity to

shame highlights its possible disruptions of sentimental stasis through accumulative and retrospective analysis, Becky's engagement with shame emphasizes its compelling, embodied effects, which can animate, as well as potentially revise, social and aesthetic conventions.

In her cantankerous exit from Miss Pinkerton's academy, Becky's penetrating comprehension of social convention, with its many injustices and hypocrisies, appears to find limited relief in a potent mix of "hatred" and acts of violent revolt and rejection. "An almost livid look of hatred" accompanies her dramatic flinging away of the dictionary, followed by "a smile that was perhaps scarcely more agreeable" as she says, "So much for the Dixonary, and thank God I'm out of Chiswick" (9). The narrator further emphasizes Becky's driving "hatred" when he wryly observes that "though Miss Rebecca Sharp had twice had occasion to thank Heaven; it has been in the first place for ridding her of some person whom she hated, and secondly for enabling her to bring her enemies to some sort of perplexity and confusion" (10). Two problems particularly plague Becky's stark displays of contempt, problems accentuated by her richly connotative spurning of "Johnson's Dixonary." How to create strong effects in others that are not merely alienating? And how to establish affective investments—in others, in the social world, in literature—that can coexist with sharp critical awareness, especially of social and aesthetic conventions? In shame, Becky finds a feeling that does not just work—on her and others—in spite of her incisive self-consciousness, but through it.

The compatibility of Becky's heightened awareness with shameful spectacles comes into relief through the problems of her sentimental displays. Martin Meisel suggests that Becky's oft-noted association with theatricality stems not so much from skill, as from inadequate sentimental acting: "The reader is brought to perceive Becky as an actress because she is a bad actress of sentiment. The pretense is transparent; the

language, attitudes, even costumes, are ‘theatrical’: that is, they are stereotyped, shrill (a favorite epithet for Becky’s voice), visibly calculated for ‘effect,’ and faintly wrong in timing or tone.”³⁵ Meisel’s description of Becky’s shortcomings reveals sentimentality’s tricky bind: how to avoid the “stereotyped” as well as the “faintly wrong in timing or tone”? To seem overly proficient—to avoid the “faintly wrong”—risks ruining the performance, even as sentimentality, in its mode of immediate legibility, relies on repeated conventions that have little room for the “faintly wrong.” Accordingly, Becky’s hyperawareness of sentimentality’s conventions, and of the need for those conventions to be clearly recognizable, gets her into trouble, making her performances look overly contrived, manipulative, and insincere. Her self-conscious deployment of sentimental convention especially obtrudes in her various retellings of Rawdon Crawley’s abuse of her, when she takes on the role of the wronged, innocent wife to explain their separation. Her recounting of this abuse for Jos Sedley pulls out all the stops, as she “passed her handkerchief with tattered lace across her eyelids” and proclaims herself the “truest wife that ever lived” and the “fondest mother” (655). When her account culminates with what should be the perfect combination of sentimental gestures, it instead becomes most clunky:

“I had but one child . . . they tore it from me—tore it from me;” and she put her hand to her heart with a passionate gesture of despair, burying her face for a moment on the bed.

The brandy-bottle inside clinked up against the plate which held the cold sausage. Both were moved, no doubt, by the exhibition of so much grief. (655)

Becky’s patent hypocrisy is the most obvious focus of satire here. But Thackeray also troubles, as he does in his earlier essays, the aesthetic clumsiness of trying to juggle too many sentimental signs at once, despite the codified proliferation needed to guaranteed their effect. The joke of cheap, hard objects jarring against the “exhibition

³⁵ Martin Meisel, *Realization: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 333.

of so much grief” additionally suggests the inflexibility of sentimental forms—especially as they are deployed knowingly by Becky—and the stale repetition required for them to move the spectator. The banging of the brandy-bottle against the sentimental gesture emphasizes a further discordance: that between Becky’s growing disregard for social niceties after she is spurned by “society,” and her flickering desires to reconnect with it. The narrator warns that, after breaking with her husband, “there was a period of Mrs. Becky’s life, when she was seized, not by remorse, but by a kind of despair, and absolutely neglected her person, and did not even care for her reputation” (638). During this near-shameless break with social norms, spurts of sentimentality provide the shaky means of reattachment.

However, when Becky is moving up in “good” society, and resides briefly among the best before her fall, shame proves her greatest asset, allowing her to produce effective, self-conscious *and* affectively charged spectacles. The affective animation of shame wards off bouts of alienation: even when Becky is most fully integrated into high society, the narrator suggests that she maintains strains of the active contempt of her youth and anticipates the listless “kind of despair . . . that did not even care for her reputation” toward which she is headed:

Becky has often spoken in subsequent years of this season in her life when she moved among the very greatest circles of the London fashion. Her success excited, elated, and then bored her. . . . Becky’s former acquaintances hated and envied her: the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit. “I wish I were out of it,” she said to herself. “I would rather be a parson’s wife, and teach a Sunday School than this; or a sergeant’s lady and ride in the regimental wagon; or, O how much gayer it would be to wear the spangles and trowsers, and dance before a booth at a fair.” (504)

The fantasy of the sensational self-exposure of “danc[ing] before a booth at a fair” sparks a renewed interest in those around her, spurred by her sense of the aghast fascination she could extract from them: “How Lady Blinkey would open her eyes, and Lady Grizzel Macbeth would stare!” (504). The fantasy briefly cures her

“yawning in spirit,” but imaginatively takes the spectacle of shame to the shameless extremity of a final act of defiance, akin to pitching “Johnson’s Dictionary” back at those who gave it to her.

In practice, Becky avoids such full and permanent shameful exposure, instead harnessing the frisson of shame through carefully calibrated, partial displays. The technique is exemplified by the show Becky *actually* gives Lady Grizzel Macbeth, who becomes irritated when Becky converses in perfect French “rather ostentatiously”:

“How very well you speak French,” Lady Grizzel said. . . .

“I ought to know it,” Becky modestly said, casting down her eyes. “I taught it in a school, and my mother was a Frenchwoman.”

Lady Grizzel was won by her humility, and was mollified towards the little woman. She deplored the leveling tendencies of the age, which admitted persons of all classes into the society of their superiors: but her ladyship owned, that this one at least was well behaved and never forgot her place in life. (505)

Rather than phobically dodge the shame clustering around her upward mobility and dubious origins, Becky eagerly showcases it, always keeping tight reins on the performance. Through her understanding of social norms and their slightest deviations, as well as her more contextually specific self-consciousness, she probes the limits of the socially acceptable, and in so doing pushes them as well. With shame, the “faintly wrong in timing or tone” drives, rather than deflates, the effect. Becky uses what is slightly off in herself or others as the terms of engagement, making that the space for subtle revision of the very conventions she employs. Accordingly, “Lady Grizzel was won by her humility” and gives Becky a place in her circle that her fixed sense of propriety would not usually allow. At other times, Becky wins over others by wielding their shame as her protection. When Mr. Wagg approaches Becky at a dinner party, intent on publicly humiliating her, “The little woman, attacked on a sudden, but never without arms, lighted up in an instant, parried and reposted with a

home-thrust, which made Wagg's face tingle with shame" (506). Self-consciousness—and the ability to incite it in others—proves an active weapon, rather than a fatal flaw, in her social performances: shameful self-consciousness pierces the body as much as sentimentality, and keeps Becky "lighted up" in animated relation to surroundings that otherwise risk losing their affective hold on her.

Becky's spectacles of shame also capitalize on an ambiguity of signification that sentimentality cannot easily accommodate. Her sallies with Rawdon during their courtship exemplify her technique of skillfully conjuring the contours of her own possible shame, but refusing fully to inhabit them. When Rawdon "rallied her about his father's attachment," Becky seizes on the promising material, piling all her various claims to shame—class, nationality, and sexuality—onto his suggestion: "You don't suppose I can't defend my own honour"; "Do you suppose I have no feeling of self-respect, because I am poor and friendless, and because rich people have none?"; "Do you suppose a Montmorency is not as good as a Crawley?" (143). Her litany of amassed humiliations—painstakingly outlined through her ostensible refusal of them—culminates in the deflection of shame onto Rawdon: "I can endure poverty, but not shame—neglect, but not insult; and insult from—from *you*" (143). Far from repelled, Rawdon is left a "humiliated, infatuated guards-man" (143). When Becky strains at embodying sentimental clichés like the "truest wife that ever lived" and the "fondest mother," the glaring gap between herself and the idealized, inflexible signifier signals the failure of her sentimental mode: with shame, such a gap forms the essence of the show, and critical self-consciousness only heightens the effects. Becky's most intriguing shameful effects insinuate her distance from the social ideal, while also eluding the absolute stain of irredeemable shame.

Vanity Fair depicts such ambiguous shame as a dangerous, but also potentially quite profitable, form. Thackeray's own style intersects in striking—and sometimes

rather ostentatious—ways with Becky’s speculative courting of shame. The narrator’s constant, pointed direct address to the reader echoes in Becky’s rhetorical flourish, designed to spread shame to Rawdon: “I can endure poverty, but not shame . . . from *you*.” Thackeray’s narrative techniques, particularly direct address, most conspicuously overlap with Becky’s shameful spectacles when her affair with Lord Steyne propels her towards dizzying rewards as well as considerable risk. Becky’s indelicate connection with Lord Steyne fuels her social and financial credit as long as its exact nature can be kept provocatively fuzzy. To emphasize the precariousness of her lucrative position, the narrator describes Becky’s reputation being bandied about freely by merchants and servants as well as high society. The narrator brings the reader into this circulation of Becky’s story when he directly warns “you” about trafficking, like Becky, in ambiguous shame:

If you are guilty: tremble. That fellow behind your chair may be Janissary with a bow-string in his plush breeches pocket. If you are not guilty have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt.

“Was Rebecca guilty or not?” the Vehmgericht of the servants’ hall had pronounced against her.

And, I shame to say, she would not have got credit had they not believed her to be guilty. . . . And so—guiltless very likely—she was writhing and pushing onward towards what they call a “position in society,” and the servants were pointing at her as lost and ruined. (445)

What begins as a warning against Becky’s flirtations with disgrace takes on their defining features as the passage continues. Shame spreads, here, from the possibly guilty Rebecca to the surrounding activity of posing—and speculating on—the question of her guilt. The narrator broaches this shameful activity—what “I shame to say”—by lingering, much like Becky’s wont, on its classed inflections, associating such speculation with the “Vehmgericht of the servants’ hall.” The narrator also, however, claims a distinction between himself and those shamefully gambling on the assumption of Becky’s necessary guilt. Unlike “those who had pronounced against her” as “lost and ruined” (many of whom ultimately suffer financially from this

unsound premise for “credit”), the narrator refuses to fix Becky’s guilt, wavering between the presentation of damning evidence and the possibility that she is “guiltless very likely.” The narrator therefore resists fixing his own shame as well, insofar as such shame depends on declaring Becky unequivocally guilty, and speculating on that absolute guilt. He stakes his claim, instead, on the narrative “credit” of Becky’s ambiguous displays of shame.

Thackeray most dramatically calls in the value of such narrative credit when Becky loses control of her own shameful speculations. Upon being discovered with Lord Steyne in compromising circumstances, Becky must forgo her previously profitable coyness in a stab at saving face with her husband: “‘I am innocent,’ said Becky. And he left without another word” (534). After desperately repeating the hackneyed refrain of stage-melodrama heroines—“I am innocent”—to no effect, Becky is left amidst her “heap of tumbled vanities lying in a wreck,” which, we learn earlier in the scene, includes “banks notes” and “love-letters many years old.”³⁶ The contents of her thoughts parallel the “tumbled vanities” of these documents, as the narrator asks, “What were her thoughts when he left her?” and then fills them in partially: “She thought of her long past life, and all the dismal incidents of it. Ah, how dreary it seemed, how miserable, lonely and profitless!” (534-35).

Just as Amelia’s shamed body approximates the extremities of sentimentality in “The letter before Waterloo,” Becky’s shamed thoughts here slide toward the other extreme—the blank of detachment. Her interiority resonates with the dilemma of the

³⁶ Describing acting in nineteenth-century English melodrama, Michael R. Booth highlights “outraged innocence” as one of the main emotions the heroine conventionally performs, with “innocent” serving as a “word usually uttered by misunderstood heroines” in a distinctive style. Booth quotes from H. J. Smith’s “The Melodrama,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1907) to illustrate this histrionic style: “It should be dwelt on syllable by syllable, and a certain long-drawn prominence should be given to the n’s. For gesture, one hand may be slightly extended and upraised, the other pressed timidly upon the breast; and at the close of the word the eyes should fall, the head droop forward with sweet submission. This position may be retained for several seconds. Then, the gallery will clap—tumultuously.” Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 201, 194.

sentimental letter in *Vanity Fair*, its “destruction,” as well as its disappearing ink, now moved inward to fuse letter and exposed feminine mind. The crisis of Becky’s fall from social grace carries a tinge of wish fulfillment, as if the inevitable climax of the contemptuous longing for social rupture contained in Becky’s hurling of the dictionary and fantasy of dancing in the fair. When the break actually arrives, however, Becky grasps at the traces of the sentimental signifier—the cliché “I am innocent” being just her first attempt—whose emotional effects, on herself and others, seem fading fast. While Becky’s shameful spectacles entertain the reanimating and revisionary possibilities of shame throughout much of *Vanity Fair*, this push to the brink of social alienation delves anxiously into shame’s distinct hazards. Subsequently, in Becky’s frequent, active flouting of social conventions, interspersed with numerous incidents of her being peremptorily cut by former acquaintances when she attempts reconnection, the narrative stages two such risks: voluntary isolation and repressive banishment imposed “for shame.”

Just as the sentimental manifestation of “The letter before Waterloo” was not its final destination, Becky’s exposed mind, mirroring the haunting extremes of sentimental ink, is also redelivered, here via direct address to the reader. The narrator follows the answered question, “What were her thoughts when he left her?” with a more open-ended query:

What *had* happened? Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth when it came from those lips; or if that corrupt heart was in this case pure? All her lies and her schemes, all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy. (535)

On the one hand, the narrator appears to replicate Becky’s disdainfully detached tendencies, fueled by her keen insight, in this case critically rejecting Becky herself as a worthless, “corrupt” object of contempt. But on the other hand, the narrator turns toward reconnection in Becky’s own favorite form, the spectacle of ambiguous shame.

The unresolved question of Becky's guilt in the affair with Lord Steyne places an essential ambiguity at the "heart" of *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray counteracts the "bankruptcy" of Becky's assigned guilt within the world of *Vanity Fair* by endlessly prolonging the ambiguous and enticing effects of Becky's shameful speculations within the narrative of *Vanity Fair*. The narrator's questions cast his and the reader's interpretive processes as additional spectacles, especially steeped in shame: the recirculated question of the "servants' hall"—"Was Rebecca guilty or not?"—that the narrator would "shame to say," is here said anyway in direct address to the reader. As Becky embarks on her shameless descent, direct address keeps her ambiguous shame—and its potentially engaging spectacle—in sight.

The feminized bodies of the narrator and addressed reader are even more directly exposed as Becky threatens to sink entirely out of narrative view. When the narration approaches "a period in Mrs. Becky's life, when she . . . absolutely neglected her person, and did not even care about her reputation," the question of what one might "shame to say" switches to the content of the novel itself. The narrator coyly highlights *and* downplays the scandalous content of *Vanity Fair*: "If we were to give a full account of her proceeding during a couple of years that followed after the Curzon Street catastrophe, there might be some reason for people to say this book was improper" (638). To keep the novel presentable, Becky is slowly submerged in a murky pool of "*abattement* and degradation . . . as a man who goes overboard hangs on to a spar whilst any hope is left, and then flings it away and goes down, when he finds that struggling he is vain." (638). In contrast, the narrator and reader are kept afloat, and clearly in view, through the more ambiguous spectacle of their shared shame:

We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley's biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands—the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to

hearing vice called by its proper name. There are things we do and know perfectly well in *Vanity Fair*, though we never speak of them . . . and a polite public will no more bear to read an authentic description of vice than a truly-refined English or American female will permit the word breeches to be pronounced in her chaste hearing. And yet, Madam, both are walking the world before our faces every day, without much shocking us. If you were to blush every time they went by what complexions you would have! It is only when their naughty names are called out that your modesty has any occasion to show alarm or sense of outrage, and it has been the wish of the present writer, all through this story, deferentially to submit to the fashion at present prevailing, and only to hint at the existence of wickedness in a light, easy, and agreeable manner, so that nobody's fine feelings may be offended. (637)

As in "Going to See a Man Hanged," Thackeray—as the "present writer"—here comes "face to face" with the reader—a reader who is no longer imagined as "an individual man," but as a blushing, "truly-refined English or American female." By comparing *Vanity Fair*'s narration to the "breeches" that are "walking the world before our faces every day," the narrator stages a confrontation between a masculine form ("breeches") and the feminization of "our faces" that are possibly blushing. On the one hand, the narrator wields the masculine power of "breeches," using his direct address to shame the susceptible, feminized reader. In this sense, the image of the automatic, overwhelming, and constant blush in response to "breeches"—"If you were to blush every time they went by what complexions you would have!"—foregrounds the potential of shame's impact to be as immediate, embodied, and statically repeated as sentimentality, particularly the emblematic sentimental tears. But on the other hand, a constant, uncontrolled physical response is precisely what the addressed "Madam" *does not* have; instead this figure for the reader "has any occasion to show alarm or sense of outrage" only intermittently, and "only when their naughty names are called out." This feminized "polite public" of blushing readers take on the "breeches," insofar as they combine the embodied, emotive sensitivity culturally aligned with the feminine and the controlled rational judgment associated with the masculine. The blush maintains a selective responsiveness: it is specifically attuned to

linguistic signification and transgression of conventional usages—“naughty names” that are “called out” in violation of the representative norms of the “fashion at present prevailing.” Far from the unreflective, purely emotive sentimental vulnerability that critics have perceived in Thackeray’s characterizations of the feminized reader, this vividly evoked “English or American female” cultivates a strangely calibrated blush, one that extends the viscerally charged and analytically controlled qualities we have seen in Amelia’s analytic tears and Becky’s self-conscious spectacles of shame. Set quietly next to, and despite, his satire of feminine “fine feelings,” Thackeray’s figuration of the reader blends emotive investment and critical acumen through an emotionally charged, self-conscious shame. Thackeray’s blushing “Madam,” evincing the feminine self-consciousness of “breeches” and the masculine self-consciousness of one who wears the “breeches,” tentatively negotiates *Vanity Fair*’s thematized emotional problem—with its heavily gendered implications—by staging a critically conscious *and* emotionally invested response to the “things we do and know perfectly well in *Vanity Fair*,” and to how these “things” appear in literature.

While the selectively blushing woman is accorded some of the critical self-consciousness aligned with the “breeches,” the narrator initially appears to waver between his possible affinity with the blushing physiognomy—suggested in the joint image of “our faces”—and a firmly phobic projection of that exposed face squarely onto the feminized “you.” As the passage continues, however, the narrator—cast as an “I” and an “author, with modest pride”—presents the image of the “monster’s hideous tail” that threatens his own shameful exposure, providing “some reason for people to say this book was improper”:

I defy anyone to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner. In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above water? No! Those

who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hidden and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but about the water-line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, decorous, and has any the most squeamish immoralist in *Vanity Fair* a right to cry fie? When, however, the syren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labour lost to look into it ever so curiously. (638)

The overdetermined “monster’s hideous tail,” affixed to the “syren,” is central to many assessments of *Vanity Fair*’s gender ideology, with interpretations of its rich symbolism ascribing to it everything from the height of misogynist fear to more ambivalent justifications of Becky or assertions of her power.³⁷ It is useful to contextualize this striking image of the “tail” as a continuation of the immediately preceding “breeches,” and thus as part of a broader, specifically linguistic spectacle of flirtatiously shameful exposure. “[T]he author” and his acts of “describing” and “show[ing]” are as much on display here as Becky’s “tail,” just as his narrative’s figurative “breeches” have previously stood in for “Mrs. Rebecca Crawley’s biography.” Adopting the seemingly defensive position of “defy[ing] anyone to say that our Becky . . . has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner,” the author’s honor appears as much at stake as Becky’s own. And like Becky, in her earlier, ambiguous shows of shame, the author’s denial of shame is a histrionic, seductive suggestion of it. The author’s “hideous tail” unfurls here, as elsewhere, through direct address, rhetorically curling around the reading public with the suggestive question that the “author . . . asks his readers all round.”

³⁷ See, for example, Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982); Judith L. Fisher, *Thackeray’s Skeptical Narrative and the “Perilous Trade” of Authorship* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002); Lisa Jadwin, “Clytemnestra Rewarded: The Double Conclusion of *Vanity Fair*,” in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1993); James Phelan, “*Vanity Fair*: Listening as a Rhetorician—and a Feminist,” in *Out of Bounds: Male Voices and Gender(ed) Criticism*, eds. Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1990); and Harry E. Shaw, “Why Won’t Our Terms Stay Put? The Narrative Communication Diagram Scrutinized and Historicized,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

The author's terse disavowal of the "monster's hideous tail above water"—his emphatic "No!"—is undercut by the lingering invocation of "waves that are pretty transparent" in his next, slowly uncoiling question. Inviting the blushing reader to more actively, and shamefully, "peep down," the shimmering "water-line" of the narrator's question, much like the blush, animates a "proper, agreeable, decorous" posture on the narrator's part, but one that still provides a "pretty transparent" view to fuller shame down below. Even as, at this point in the novel, Becky figuratively drowns in her increasing disregard of her deepening shame, even though "the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labour lost to look into it ever so curiously," Thackeray, of course, cannot help but look. Hardly "labour lost," his persistent, ambiguous displays of the shameful woman—whether the blushing "Madam," Amelia, or here, Becky—suggest a model for *Vanity Fair*'s form and its desired narrative effects.

"AUTHORS' MISERIES"

Thackeray's charged imagery of the blushing reader and monstrous author comes at the very beginning of the last serial part of *Vanity Fair*'s first run, when the rapidly-approaching publication of *Vanity Fair* as a single volume perhaps loomed large, fueling textual ruminations on reception and authorial self-presentation related to, specifically, a "book [that] was improper."³⁸ Two of Thackeray's illustrations in this final serial installment, "The letter before Waterloo" and "Virtue rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair," emphasize *Vanity Fair*'s status as not just "book," but novel. In "The letter before Waterloo," the letter that Amelia ambivalently grasps resonates,

³⁸ *Vanity Fair* was first issued in monthly serial parts between January 1847 and July 1848. The last serial part, a double-number installment of numbers 19 and 20, was published on July 1, 1848. The first book edition followed soon after, published on July 18, 1848. Peter L. Shillingsburg provides an overview of *Vanity Fair*'s early publication—detailing how "following the completion of the parts issue on 1 July 1848 and during the succeeding fifteen years, Bradbury and Evans issued the first edition of *Vanity Fair* continuously in parts and volume forms"—in "The Printing, Proof-reading and Publishing of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*: The First Edition," *Studies in Bibliography* 34 (1981): 121.



Figure 6. William Makepeace Thackeray,
 “Virtue rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair.” *Vanity Fair* (688).

much like the trope of the “indelible” and fading ink in *Vanity Fair*, with the form of both the serial novel and the sentimental epistolary novel. The significance of this illustration to Thackeray’s meditations on the emotional and material form of his novel is heightened by its shifting placement in the text: while “The letter before Waterloo” was first published in *Vanity Fair*’s final serial part, it became the frontispiece for the book. Just as Amelia’s cry of “for shame” to Becky reverberates around the two school-girls’ entrance into Vanity Fair, Amelia’s emotive posture of shame, as frontispiece, shapes the reader’s affective entry-point into the novel. This new entry point for the book further suggests shame’s relevance, particularly as an accumulative, reflective emotion, to Thackeray’s negotiation of sentimental absorption and critical detachment, and, further, to his negotiation of serial and single-volume material forms, and the emotional problems of shifting between the two. If “for shame” organizes the relations of Amelia and Becky, as characters and as protagonists

of a double plot structure, it seems appropriate that the book closes with an ambiguous image of Becky's humility, with Amelia an ambivalent onlooker, in "Virtue rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair" (see figure 6). Here, the comic allusion to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* casts Becky's shamefully self-conscious animation and revision of social convention as an intervention in literary conventions, especially the sentimental conventions that Richardson's novels greatly influenced.

Thackeray's "Authors' Miseries," a series of comic drawings that ran in *Punch* shortly after his completion of *Vanity Fair*, suggests that the emotional problem central to that novel continued to influence not only his own work, but his perception of the challenges facing the contemporary author more generally. The first number of "Authors' Miseries," published in September of 1848, returns once again to the ambiguously emotive female body as central to literary emotions, authorial and otherwise. In the drawing, Thackeray himself stoops over the shoulder of a drowsy female reader; the caption deploys a comic variation of direct address as self-address: "Perhaps you flatter yourself that you have made an impression on Miss Flannigan (at Worthing), and you find her asleep over your favourite number" (see figure 7).³⁹ Miss Flannigan's overdetermined posture condenses the three overlapping affective modes of reading emphasized in *Vanity Fair*: sentimental absorption ("you have made an impression on Miss Flannigan"); extreme detachment ("you find her asleep over your favourite number"); and shame (in its echoes of Amelia's shamed pose in "The letter before Waterloo"). Thackeray once again "peep[s] down" onto an enticing and potentially disturbing sight, but the "truly-refined English . . . female" whose vantage he seeks betrays no blush: instead, she takes Becky's "yawning in spirit" to a mortifying extreme—especially mortifying for an author who appears sentimentally invested in making a strong and lasting "impression." However, it is in this

³⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, "Authors' Miseries No. 1," *Punch* 15 (1848): 105.

AUTHORS' MISERIES

No. 1



Perhaps you flatter yourself that you have made an impression on Miss Flannigan (at Worthing), and you find her asleep over your favourite number.

Figure 7. William Makepeace Thackeray, "Authors' Miseries No. 1," from *Punch* (105).

mortification, as it broaches sentimentality, that a possible source of reinvigorated interest emerges, if not for Miss Flannigan then for the reader of the drawing who peeps at the shamefully exposed author as he raptly reads his possible "impression" on a novel reader. The serial part is at the center of Thackeray's shamefully self-conscious negotiation of readers' affective responses. But insofar as the discarded "number" at the woman's feet resonates with the number of this drawing, the number of a serial novel like the recently published *Vanity Fair*, and, through the allusion to Amelia's posture in *Vanity Fair*'s frontispiece, the sentimental letter and sentimental epistolary form, Thackeray consolidates here not just many of the forms contemporary authors and readers were facing, but the diverse affective strands that could, in their aesthetic intermingling, shape—even reanimate—their conventions.

Despite the current critical view that Thackeray's work is afflicted by a

contemptuous, or emotionally detached, self-consciousness, Thackeray was not alone in his sense that shame constituted, but might also help solve, both “Authors’ Miseries” and those miseries inflicted by authors on the reading public. George Henry Lewes notes of Thackeray, in 1848, that “[t]he author indulges in no sentimentalities,” further observing that “Mr. Thackeray grows serious and pathetic at times—but almost as if he were ashamed of it, like a man caught in tears at the theatre.” Lewes gestures at the broader literary scene that this “almost . . . ashamed” style could benefit, casting Thackeray’s avoidance of sentimental indulgence as “a merit worth noting in a literary age which has a tendency to mistake spasm for force.”⁴⁰ In another 1848 review of Thackeray’s writing, Abraham Hayward similarly picks up on an ambiguous, yet palpable, shame in Thackeray’s style:

His pathos (though not so deep as Dickens) is exquisite; the more so, perhaps, because he seems to struggle against it, and to be half ashamed of being caught in the melting mood, but the attempt to be caustic, satirical, ironical, or philosophical, on such occasions, is uniformly vain and again and again have we found reason to admire how an originally fine and kind nature remains essentially free from worldliness, and, in the highest pride of intellect, pays homage to the heart.⁴¹

Such accounts may seem surprising for current readers, prone to understand Thackeray’s “intellect” as decidedly at odds with his “heart.” Nonetheless, they capture the possibilities of Thackeray’s work and its potent mix of critical and affective modes—the revisionary possibilities of being “half ashamed of being caught in the melting mood.”

⁴⁰ George Henry Lewes, “*Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*,” *Athenæum* (Aug. 12, 1848): 795.

⁴¹ Abraham Hayward, “Thackeray’s Writing,” *Edinburgh Review* 87 (Jan. 1848): 50.

CHAPTER THREE

“ERRING AS I”:

JANE EYRE’S SHAMEFUL REVISIONS OF VICTORIAN SYMPATHY

“PAIN, SHAME, IRE”

We were ascending the avenue when he thus paused; the hall was before us. Lifting his eye to the battlements, he cast over them a glare such as I never saw before or since. Pain, shame, ire—impatience, disgust, detestation—seemed momentarily to hold a quivering conflict in the large pupil dilating under his ebon eyebrow. Wild was the wrestle which should be paramount; but another feeling rose and triumphed; something hard and cynical; self-willed and resolute: it settled his passion and petrified his countenance: he went on:—“During the moment I was silent, Miss Eyre, I was arranging a point with my destiny. She stood there, by the beech-trunk—a hag like one of those who appeared to ‘Macbeth’ on the heath of Forres. ‘You like Thornfield?’ she said, lifting her finger; and then she wrote in the air a memento, which ran in lurid hieroglyphics all along the house-front, between the upper and lower row of windows. ‘Like it if you can!’ ‘Like it if you dare!’

‘I will like it,’ said I. ‘I dare to like it;’ and (he subjoined moodily) I will keep my word: I will break obstacles to happiness, to goodness—yes, goodness.”

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

While Jane Eyre ascribes Rochester’s mysterious pause, here, to an emotional battle, it is not entirely clear what feeling comes out on top. The “quivering conflict” between “pain, shame, ire—impatience, disgust, detestation” yields no clear winner before the intrusion of “another feeling” that “rose and triumphed.”¹ In Rochester’s own words, he has been struggling with a “hag”—clearly an allusion to his hidden wife, Bertha Mason, and the feelings that she both inspires in and embodies for him—and he pronounces that, having vanquished the “hag,” “happiness” has won the day. But this assertion jars with Jane’s description of “something hard and cynical” that has ascended over the “quivering conflict” in Rochester’s eye with petrifying effect.

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 1987), 125. Further references will appear in the text.

Rochester forcefully imposes “happiness,” squashing the “quivering conflict” of competing emotions, yet Jane’s rapt scrutiny and precise naming of the “pain, shame, ire” in his “dilating” eye capture her ongoing interrogation of the role these affective modes can play in felicitous selfhood and intimate relations, particularly if she is to be happy, as she asserts earlier, “in my way” (7). Jane, like Rochester, is attracted to the state of happiness and its verbal assertion: her confident proclamation at novel’s end that “My Edward and I, then, are happy” cements the narrative’s romantic resolution (398). Perhaps more surprisingly, Jane introduces herself in the novel’s bleak opening sequence as already enjoying moments of happiness. Despite her strong sense of estrangement at Gateshead Hall in her childhood, the narrating Jane remembers that, sequestered behind a curtain to read, “With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way” (7). Happiness appears a highly individualized and malleable state: to be happy in one’s own way can entail personal idiosyncrasies and a variety of private and social arrangements, largely because such happiness also seems to accommodate, for Jane, other feelings. If Jane’s intent gaze at Rochester’s wrestling “pain, shame, ire”—feelings positioned as simultaneously guaranteeing the hero’s emotional complexity, the heroine’s interpretive acuity, and the potential depth of their burgeoning intimacy—anticipates the centrality of these feelings to her self-proclaimed happiness at the novel’s end, these affective ingredients also encapsulate the interpretive lenses and postures that Jane adopts throughout the novel, in relation to others as well as to her own, self-narrated “I.” The novel, as much as Jane herself, ultimately refuses to expel “pain,” “shame,” and “ire” from a conception of happiness: these emotions’ “quivering conflict” keeps possibilities for relationships and subjectivity at play, as potential sites of revision rather than petrification.

Jane's assessment of Rochester's emotional conflict also offers an apt figure for the critical desires and practices that have been directed at *Jane Eyre* itself. The intense, continuing critical fascination with Charlotte Brontë's work, and with *Jane Eyre* in particular, has been fueled by questions revolving around psychological—and more specifically, emotional—presentation, authority, ownership, and naming. The precise terms of “pain, shame, ire” that Jane initially wields as investigative and signifying tools in her analysis of Rochester's “eye” (and “I”) can be productively extended to explore our own critical lenses for *Jane Eyre*. The presence of these warring feelings metonymically captures three major and often competing affective modes that inflected the terms of subjectivity and intimate social relations in nineteenth-century British literature and culture. However, in criticism on Brontë, and on the novel form more generally, only two of these feelings have emerged from the “quivering conflict” of Victorian affective modes as “paramount”: contemporary criticism has been attentive to the centrality of anger—or “ire”—and sympathy—often thriving on “pain”—in Victorian social organization, gender relations, and novelistic politics and form. Yet shame, though it presents a potent affective mode, equally constitutive of the period's aesthetic and social possibilities, remains critically neglected.

Shame should inform critical consideration of *Jane Eyre*, not in order to invalidate the current critical lens, but to widen its scope. In its more self-reflexive moments, *Jane Eyre* models valuable approaches for our continuing engagement with the text: chief among these are an array of specified terms for conceptualizing distinct yet intersecting affective modes, tempered with the warning that to raise a single feeling above the “quivering conflict” can render interpretive possibilities “petrified.” Brontë presents shame as an emotion that can enhance possibilities for the self and for intimate connections with others, but only through its productive interaction with other

feelings such as anger, or sympathy, or happiness. Shame's inability to stand alone—its tendency to hover in the vicinity of other feelings, and its strong registering of the demands of others—represents, in fact, a large part of its value in the novel. As we will see, *Jane Eyre* links such relational qualities of shame to its particular disruption of personal emotions: shame not only resists being owned by just one individual, but is most compelling in a spectacular, conditional form, when not really belonging to anyone at all.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë explores not just the repressive but the revisionary possibilities of the scene of shame, fashioning shameful spectacles that can fuel intimate relations while still preserving individual differences, especially emotional differences. Shame's differentiated intimacy provides, in the novel, a space of mediation between the extremes of sympathy and anger. The near absence of shame in critical accounts of *Jane Eyre* thus produces a problem the novel itself raises, that of an evasive affective “medium” between what Jane calls “absolute submission” and “determined revolt” in social relations—or, to cast these extremes in the terms of contemporary novel criticism, between an oppressively normalizing socialization, particularly associated with sympathy, and a potentially antisocial alienation, linked with anger (352). The discussion that follows brings into relief shame's mediating relational and formal role in *Jane Eyre*, arguing that by constructing a shame-inflected narrating voice that enacts and bolsters eroticized investment in individualized difference, Brontë questions a normalizing and universalizing modern subjectivity, rather than, as some critics have claimed, reinforcing it. Drawing on theorizations of shame's form, especially those of Philip Fisher, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Adam Smith, and, aligning this affect theory with narratology, I explore how Brontë innovates with retrospective narration and hypothetical focalization to stretch shame's possibilities of intimate relational difference within social relations, subjectivity,

novelistic form, and literary hermeneutics. Brontë's narrative innovation offers a particularly rich example of shameful signification—a signification that disrupts and revises sympathy's often normalizing mimetic imperative, and allows for representations of intimate relations that unsettle strict identification. Insofar as *Jane Eyre*'s shameful signification contributes to an autobiographical narrative voice widely regarded, especially from feminist perspectives, as notable for its fraught yet potent agency and self-assertion, Brontë's novel situates shameful signification in an empowered voice that particularly showcases the productive, revisionary valences of shame throughout the nineteenth century. These valences, as I will discuss in conclusion, have continuing relevance for contemporary critical debates on the relationship between feminism and novelistic feeling.

“I KNOW NO MEDIUM”: *JANE EYRE*'S MEDIATING SHAME

Jane Eyre raises the problem of an evasive intermediate feeling—or “medium”—when St. John Rivers paves the way for his marriage proposal with a curt command for a private walk with Jane. Jane comments to the reader on her quick acquiescence:

I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the moment of bursting, sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other; and as neither present circumstances warranted, nor my present mood inclined me to mutiny, I observed careful obedience to St. John's directions; and in ten minutes I was treading the wild track of the glen, side by side with him. (352)

This statement highlights Jane's ongoing crisis of sympathy in the novel while problematizing two of her common responses, “absolute submission” and “determined revolt.” Rather than detailing a gradual “triumph of sympathy,” the plot stages sympathy's repeated ruptures and inevitable impossibility, even as Jane continues to

seek it.² The crisis of sympathy extends beyond Jane's relationships with overt antagonists, such as the Reeds, and constitutes, to varying degrees, the state of *all* relations—even those more intimate relations with characters such as Bessie, Miss Temple, Helen Burns, and Rochester. The novel suggests that having any claims to one's own, distinct character is to find oneself constantly rubbing up against other “positive, hard characters” that, rather than displaying full sympathetic likeness, are in some sense necessarily “antagonistic.” Intimacy becomes the fraught process of negotiating the repellent “hardness” of another's difference without effacing the other or losing one's own distinct form. From initially finding herself, among the Reeds at Gateshead Hall, “a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them,” Jane's emotional trajectory moves not toward sympathetic closure, but rather toward intimacies less dependant on sympathetic identification (12).

As two polar responses to the fantasy of natural or easy identification, “absolute submission and determined revolt” overlap suggestively with the modes of relational subjectivity that feminist critics have organized under the headings of sympathy and anger, in readings of *Jane Eyre* and of the Victorian novel more broadly. Moments of Jane's actual or near submission to others' desires often are cast by Brontë as desperate and dangerous bids for sympathetic union. The obliterated agency implied by “absolute submission” echoes recent critiques launched at sympathy as a hierarchal, objectifying concept that, in practice, often demands one subject's marginalization or erasure by an empowered other, or more broadly, all individualized subjects' self-regulating submission to normative socializing forces. “Determined revolt,” on the other hand, captures the dramatic, radically disruptive

² I borrow the phrase “triumph of sympathy” from Lorri Nandrea, who usefully identifies the “widely noted ... manner in which the end of the novel emphasizes Jane's success in eliminating all possible threats to her newly attained subject position and presents us with a picture of a hyperbolically unified and autonomous subjectivity” (119). See Lorri G. Nandrea, “Desiring Difference: Sympathy and Sensibility in *Jane Eyre*,” *Novel* 37, no. 1/2 (2003): 112-34.

potential of refusing subjectivity and relations on another's—or more broadly modern society's—limited terms, while also suggesting the nightmarish alienation and loss of social legibility that threatens to accompany complete rebellion. Jane's "determined revolt" often takes the specific emotional form of anger, and her angry outbursts particularly highlight a tenuous distinction between subversive rejection of, and newly instated demands for, sympathetic identification—a tension that haunts anger's relational dynamics in *Jane Eyre*. Jane's reactive anger fuels cycles of rebellion and replication, as she refuses emotional submission to other "hard characters" only to desire similar submission from others. Anger broaches the collapse of relationality; in attempts to repair this alienation, Jane often seeks new intimates who will identify absolutely with her anger, turning her rebellion into sympathetic conscription of others, such as Helen Burns and Miss Temple, who in turn refuse to submit. An emotional "medium" would thus offer respite from not just the extreme oppositions but also the constant oscillations of submission and revolt.

While Jane introduces her walk with St. John by denying a "medium," over its course just such a stance "between absolute submission and determined revolt" emerges in reaction to his demand that Jane accompany him as a missionary to India, and do so as his wife. St. John's proposal represents the pinnacle of a sympathetic struggle between the two "hard characters," in which each tries to overwrite the other's emotions and desires in his or her own image. Early in their relationship, St. John explicitly challenges Jane's attempts at sympathetic interpretation of his feelings for Rosamond Oliver. Acknowledging "something penetrating in your eye," he still insists: "you partially misinterpret my emotions. You think them more profound and potent than they are. You give me a larger allowance of sympathy than I have just claim to ... Know me to be what I am—a cold, hard man" (330). This quality of hardness signifies a challenge to Jane's assessments based on her own emotional

tendencies, but still constitutes a space of intimate exposure and relations on other terms. Despite the misinterpretation of her sympathetic hermeneutics, Jane has, he admits, “taken my confidence by storm”; thus St. John offers a stripped-down self-revelation: “I am simply, in my original state—stripped of that blood-bleached robe with which Christianity covers human deformity—a cold, hard, ambitious man” (330).

While Jane continually encounters barriers to making St. John her sympathetic counterpart, risks heighten of the reverse—that she will become instead *his* sympathetic likeness, an extension of his “hard” desires and feelings. This sympathetic pull is figured ominously: Jane admits that “By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind” as he cast a “freezing spell” (350). Brontë conveys the difficulty and cost of one interiority mirroring another through emphatically physical imagery, contrasting the erotics of St. John’s naked exposure of difference with tortuous blurrings of separate bodies. When Jane is forced onto the “rack” of sympathy (as Adam Smith famously imagined the paradigmatic sympathetic scenario), she bemoans: “it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted. The thing was as impossible as to mould my irregular features to his correct and classic pattern, to give to my changeable green eyes the sea-blue tint and solemn luster of his own” (351). St. John’s sympathetic demands become explicit when he presses his marriage proposal, tempting her to “Think like me, Jane—trust like me” and to embody “the complement of the qualities I seek” (355). Imagery of an incarcerating identification intensifies accordingly, as Jane feels “an awful charm was framing round and gathering over me” and “my iron shroud contracted round me; persuasion advanced with slow sure step” (353-354, 355). Jane’s breaking point is marked by a shift from physical enclosure to actual invasion: “I shuddered as he spoke: I felt his influence in my marrow—his hold on my limbs” (357).

This breaking point, however, produces neither “absolute submission” nor “determined revolt”—as we might anticipate—but instead a “medium” of shame, between the two extremes, that encapsulates how shame’s affective mediation functions more generally in *Jane Eyre*. Jane negotiates St. John’s sympathetic invasion with a compromise, an agreement offered “[c]onditionally”—as she emphasizes—to work with him in India as a sister rather than a wife (357). The condition reserves for herself her “heart,” set apart from the “energies” willingly offered up to the missionary and his mission. When Jane counters St. John’s rejection of this “mutilated sacrifice” with the insistence that God can have her heart but “*You* do not want it,” the narrating Jane explains what emboldened her continued negotiation against his growing “influence”:

I had silently feared St. John till now, because I had not understood him. He had held me in awe, because he had held me in doubt. How much of him was saint, how much mortal, I could not heretofore tell: but revelations were being made in this conference: the analysis of his nature was proceeding before my eyes. I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them. I understood that, sitting there where I did, on the bank of heath, and with that handsome form before me, I sat at the feet of a man, erring as I. The veil fell from his hardness and despotism. Having felt in him the presence of these qualities, I felt his imperfection, and took courage. I was with an equal—one with whom *I might argue*—one whom, *if I saw good, I might resist*. (358, italics mine)

Neither sympathetic submission nor angry mutiny dominates Jane’s response: the two extremes instead are replaced by a conditional resistance—“I might argue,” or “if I saw good, I might resist”—that extends her conditional acceptance of St. John’s proposal. Such conditional agreement posits the possibilities of sympathetic identification or rupture without enacting either, keeping Jane and St. John in close relational proximity while preserving emotional distance and difference between them. This space of conditional agreement is supported by the imaginative spectacle of St. John’s shameful qualities—a spectacle that counters the evocation of Jane’s “mutilated sacrifice” with the unveiling of “his hardness and despotism.” The

unveiled “imperfections,” positioned as St. John’s new, true form, displace the illusive “handsome form before me.” The spectacular and somewhat superficial quality of this new “form” does not constitute the whole space of shame, however. The “hardness” of this form has accumulated multiple valences at this point in the novel, conveying the threat of enforced sympathetic submission, on the one hand, but also, particularly in its moments of naked revelation, signaling the possibility of an intimacy, and even erotic intensity, that can keep the hardness of individual character intact. Here the hardness of St. John’s form signifies not a rigid assignment of shame through the exposure of shameful imperfection, but a more transactional and conditional dynamic around shame, captured in Jane’s assertion that St. John is “a man, erring as I.” Jane implicates herself in St. John’s freshly displayed error, but also mitigates this assignment of shame and error by distributing it between both of them. Insofar as St. John is himself “erring” in the rigidity of his shaming standards, which render Jane a “mutilated sacrifice,” Jane’s own shameful error is alleviated. But insofar as he is as “erring as I,” the loosening of Jane’s shame reverberates back onto St. John’s error, relieving it as well. Rather than countering St. John’s attempts at shaming her into submission with the kind of hierarchal power reversal that characterizes their sympathetic relations, Jane imagines a relation of equality constituted through mutual, conditional proximity to hard, spectacular, shameful error: the “man, erring as I” becomes, through the specific construction of their relational dynamic, “an equal.”

While this equality avoids Jane’s submission to the compulsory sameness of absolute identification, it does not necessarily disarm shame’s potential for sympathetic socialization. In fact, shame appears initially poised in this passage to reinforce and rigidify just such identification on Jane’s terms, if not St. John’s. To capture an unbridgeable gap in their sympathetic struggle, Jane earlier evokes the physical impossibility of “moulding” her “irregular features” to St. John’s “correct and

classic pattern”: the inverse mutilation of his “handsome form” to match her own might seem to figure the means of finally closing that gap. Instead, however, sympathetic shaming becomes the “form” that can fuel identificatory socialization, but that can also, as it does here, produce an alternate content of more conditional, differentiated shameful relations. The productive interdependence—yet possible disjunctions—of shame’s physicalized form and less concrete content, repeated throughout the novel, is crystallized by the juxtapositions of Jane’s insistence that “revelations were being made in this conference: the analysis of his nature was proceeding before my eyes. I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them.” The stretched cognitive duration of an “analysis” that “was proceeding before my eyes” supplements the visual immediacy emphasized in “revelations” and the following image of St. John’s instantaneous and total revealing when the “veil fell.” Brontë echoes this tension between total visualized exposure and secondary analytic process in Jane’s claim that “I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them.” Shame allows for the complex temporal structure and competing signification of initial, visual sympathetic arrests *and* subsequent, prolonged understanding and telling of what Jane “could not heretofore tell.” This complexity constitutes shame’s promise as an emotional “medium”—its particular ethical and aesthetic value in the novel, as both a relational and representational emotion, that Brontë especially cultivates through retrospective narration and hypothetical focalization of spectacles of shame.

“THROUGH THE QUIET MEDIUM OF TIME”: SHAME AND RETROSPECTIVE NARRATION

Thus when Jane states, “I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt,” the claim rings false, not only because of evidence in the novel’s plot to the contrary, but also because of her

uncharacteristic equation of past and present knowledge in this self-assessment. The doubling of “I know no medium” and “I never in my life have known any medium” emphasizes that the first, present-tense iteration is the cognitive condition of Jane’s present, narrating self—a condition whose periodic appearances in the novel usually mark emotional and intellectual change as a central feature of her *Bildungsroman*. These present-tense interjections suggest a direct and unambiguous exposure of the narrating Jane’s current feelings and thoughts, which tend to deviate markedly from those of her past experience, both in tense and content. The first instance of such present-tense exposure of the narrator, in the early scene in which the ten-year-old Jane is locked in the red-room, highlights the way in which interpretive difference around feelings, as much as time, divides her past and present: “I could not answer the ceaseless inward question—*why* I thus suffered; now, at the distance of—I will not say how many years, I see it clearly” (12). Here, the reader is positioned to expect that emotional insight constitutes the “distance” between the experiencing and narrating Jane, and that its acquisition will close this distance as the plot moves forward.

Jane’s suffering in the red-room, like her later reflection on her tendency toward extremes rather than mediums, infuses both “absolute submission” and “determined revolt” with an inefficacy certain to threaten—if not obliterate—the legible and conscious relational self. The red-room establishes a concrete, spatio-temporal rendering of Jane’s initial lack of an emotional “medium” and unstable oscillations between relational submission and revolt. If, as many critics argue, albeit with differing emphases, Jane’s narrative ultimately can be read as her continual return to and renegotiation of a metaphoric red-room, perhaps the red-room can be seen as crystallizing a crisis of ruptured sympathy and the limited set of responsive affective strategies, especially sympathy and anger, that Jane eventually escapes through the

“medium” of shame missing in the red-room’s first configuration.³

The emotional insight that Jane reveals in her narration of the red-room sequence, in contrast to her lack of clarity during the experience, is particularly related to the problems of sympathy. After asserting that she can now “see ... clearly” why she suffered in the red-room, the narrator explains what exactly she sees: “I was a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage. If they did not love me, in fact, as little did I love them. They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them” (12). The narrating Jane clings to sympathy’s continuing appeal—in the implication that being “like” the others might have alleviated her suffering—but she also registers greater critical distance from sympathy’s allure than the child does. Jane’s insight shows that the problem was not merely that she was not “like” the Reeds, but that she made such equivalence the terms of her affection as much as they did. This self-critique emerges in the movement, as her statement progresses, from her status as “discord”—which her childhood self already appears capable of comprehending—to her own role in aggravating this discord into complete alienation—which the young Jane fails to acknowledge. The child’s thoughts on her suffering, provided a few paragraphs

³ Criticism of *Jane Eyre* has delivered on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s proposal that Jane’s experience in the red-room is “probably the most metaphorically vibrant of all her early experiences” and can serve as “a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book” (340). As a paradigm of Jane’s conflicts, the red-room has been equally central to two varying critical endeavors: to chart Jane’s development over the novel, in which she eventually escapes from the metaphoric red-room, or to chart a cyclical return to its unresolved conflicts. Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis reveals the red-room’s potential in a developmental account, arguing that “Jane’s pilgrimage consists of a series of experiences which are, in one way or another, variations on the central red-room motif of enclosure and escape,” and that ultimately end in escape (341). Sally Shuttleworth’s reading of the red-room as “a spatialized configuration of Victorian notions of female interiority” used to “capture the bewildering, contradictory formulations of femininity in Victorian discourse” exemplifies the red-room’s opposing interpretive possibility: to reveal that Jane’s “history ... is that of a series of moments of conflicts, a series, moreover, which does not display the characteristics of progression, but rather the endless reiteration of the same” (159). See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984); Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

earlier, dwell on the numerous faults of the Reeds, contrasting them to her own blameless behavior as “one who dared commit no fault” (12). The narrating Jane factors her own past approach to intimacy into the equation: “If they did not love me, in fact, as little did I love them,” she observes, implicating her own requirement of equivalence and identification as well as the Reeds’ narrow parameters for acceptance and affection. It was she, Jane recognizes, who was “a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them” through similarly limited conceptions of sympathy as the sole terms for “love.”

The novel further pressures Jane’s limited and idealized early conception of sympathy when we return to the child’s perspective, as she conjures the memory of the late Mr. Reed—“my own uncle—my mother’s brother”—as a replacement for the other Reeds’ insufficient sympathy and similarity. Mr. Reed initially arises as a fantasy of sympathetic validation for her pain and her anger, but the absolute emotional mirroring quickly takes on an eerie tinge:

I thought Mr. Reed’s spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister’s child, might quit its abode—whether in the church vault, or in the unknown world of the departed—and rise before me in this chamber. I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs, fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity. This idea, consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realised: with all my might I endeavoured to stifle it—I endeavoured to be firm. (13-14)

Jane hurries to erase the sentimental tableau’s conventional physical “sign[s] of violent grief”—“tears” and “sobs”—when their potency conjures a horrifically hypostatized “theory” of sympathy invasively looming over her “with strange pity.” The threat of Mr. Reed’s enclosing sympathy—requiring the defense of “firm” character—anticipates both the nature and imagery of Jane’s future struggles with male sympathetic invasion in her relations with St. John and Rochester. Here, despite the attempted reinstatement of “firm” difference, the brush with sympathy’s threat to a

distinct self ushers in another classic sentimental posture—the swoon—as Jane finally succumbs to an ominous “species of fit” ending in “unconsciousness” (15). Along with registering the overwhelming excess of the sympathetic specter’s “strange pity,” the fit answers Mrs. Reed’s rigid standard for sympathy—her “condition of perfect submission and stillness” for eventual liberation from the red-room—with an extreme literalization of exterior demands (14).

While Jane’s fit figures, in part, as a self-obliterating swoon into sympathy, its literalization of Mrs. Reed’s condition also verges on a subversively parodic oppositional stance that breaks completely with oppressive socializing forces. In this sense, the swoon figures the outer limit of Jane’s determination “to go all lengths” in her angry “mutiny” against the Reeds’ unjust strictures (9). Thus, if the fit results from Jane’s incantation of Mr. Reed’s ghost, that call contains vengeful anger as much as sympathetic yearning. The haunting specter and the final swoon each collapse, into a single figure, the alternative extremes of sympathetic hyper-socialization or angry, extrasocial singularity as means of escaping the red-room. Both the specter and swoon emphasize how these extremes put individuated subjectivity *and* relational reciprocity in jeopardy.

The novel’s retrospective narration imbues the red-room with the promise of eventual insight into other affective alternatives. Though the gap between experience and subsequent narration would seem to withhold any such consolation from the child, the experiencing Jane herself starts to grasp at the imaginative and formal resolutions that the narrator has refined in an effort to loosen the strictures of sympathy into a mode of relational difference. While at first “fascinated ... involuntarily” by the ghostly “strange little figure” of her mirrored reflection—a figure that anticipates Mr. Reed’s sympathetic haunting—Jane breaks from this seductive yet alienating mimesis. “Superstition was with me at that moment; but it was not yet her hour for complete

victory: my blood was still warm; the mood of the revolted slave was still bracing me with its bitter vigour; I had to stem a rapid rush of retrospective thought before I quailed to the dismal present” (11). “[R]etrospective thought” offers a fleeting reprieve from sympathy’s spell—a reprieve much more fully realized in the novel’s retrospective narration. This “retrospective thought” of the child fails to significantly disrupt either the logic or signifying system of sympathy, however, instead flowing back into them in an unstoppable, “rapid rush” that merges the reflective thought with the immediacy and continuity of present feeling. The content of this “retrospective thought” further aligns it with sympathy’s lack of differentiated relations:

All John Reed’s violent tyrannies, all his sisters’ proud indifference, all his mother’s aversion, all the servants’ partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well. Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please ... I dared commit no fault; I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night. (11-12)

Despite the gesture of distinguishing the “retrospective thought” of “bitter vigour” from the “dismal present” of superstitious sympathy, the “turbid well” of Jane’s mind mixes and erases temporal and affective distinctions into undifferentiated totalities marked by the repeated “always” and by conditions continuing from “morning to noon, from noon to night.” Such oppressive continuity defines her perception of those who surround her, whose past qualities and actions blur together and into one another as uniform failures of sympathy. Jane’s own self-conception also is prone to endless states—the “for ever” and the “never.” The insistent equivalence in perceptions of the self and others equals a “dense ignorance” that Jane bemoans: “What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection!” (12).

The narrator’s subsequent, present-tense interjection of emotional insight models both a distance from the sympathetic imperative and a set of formal strategies

to enact this distance—strategies whose absence in Jane’s previously ineffective “retrospective thought” serve to highlight their presence in the retrospective narration. Distance is as central to Jane’s changed relation to the past as it is to her new perspective on sympathy. When she says, “I could not answer the ceaseless question—*why* I thus suffered; now, at the distance of—I will not say how many years, I see it clearly,” the coy refusal to specify the distance renders it temporally indeterminate but definitely short enough to still “see ... clearly,” keeping the narrator in palpable proximity to the past even as this past is marked as separate and different. The imagery of sight positions the narrator as preserving the past spectacle of her transparently emotive self, but from a stable affective and temporal distance that removes her later self from these mimetic dynamics. Rather than re-enact the younger self’s desperate attempt to erase sentimental “sign[s] of grief” in order to efface sympathy’s specter, the narrator embeds these spectacular signs into her retrospective narration, linking them to a reflective voice that overlays their mimetic transparency with the assurance of difference between past and present selves, and, as the novel continues, between self and others. This consolatory and re-visionary potential of voice is present even within the sympathetic spectacle of Mr. Reed’s spirit, which first materializes as “a preternatural voice to comfort me” then, with increasing menace, morphs “from the gloom” into “some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity.” The interjecting narrator—one who “see[s] ... clearly” but can herself be more clearly heard than seen—counters the spirit’s looming, gradually hypostatizing sympathy with her own “preternatural voice,” which offers alternatives to sympathy that do not constitute alienation.

Another voice hovers around the red-room: Miss Abbot cries, “For shame! for shame! ... What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son!” as she and Bessie usher the struggling child into the red-room to

be “thrust ... upon a stool” (9). Miss Abbot’s cry introduces the emotion that eventually will shape Jane’s own self-perception and narrating voice, and will also bridge the red-room’s glaring gaps between self and other. As the first diegetic reference to Jane’s surname, the cry significantly inflects “Miss Eyre” with an identity-constituting shame that continues to be reinforced through the novel’s echoing of err and Eyre. Critics have been attentive to the novel’s punning on the name Eyre, most directly when Adèle Varens, upon first introduction to her governess, forces a French translation: “Aire? Bah! I cannot say it” (89). Though exploring valences of Eyre including ire, air, heir and eye/ear,⁴ critics have yet to invoke the most direct homonym, which Rochester accents when he counsels his governess: “Dread remorse when you are tempted to err, Miss Eyre: remorse is the poison of life” (119-120). Far from being the “poison of life,” error and shame provide Jane with the antidote for her wounded and wounding feelings—feelings for which the red-room provides a vivid stage and figure.

While “Miss Eyre” is interpellated by the external shaming of others, the narrator herself voices an intermingling of shameful error and subjectivity that cannot be dismissed as internalized discipline. Instead, shame provides productive affective and formal resources for self-fashioning and aesthetic production. As we have seen, Jane’s revelation that St. John is as “erring as I” imagines a social dynamic of differentiated “equality” around shame. Once “erring” is understood to evoke the heroine’s own name, the relational possibilities of perceiving another as “erring as I” intersect with a model of self-understanding. In the phrase “erring as I,” the oft-critiqued hyperbolic unity of Jane’s subjectivity, her “I,” comes into transactional

⁴ For example, Gilbert and Gubar write in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, “Jane Eyre—her name is of course suggestive—is invisible as air, the heir to nothing, secretly choking with ire” (349, 342); Nandrea observes in “Desiring Difference: Sympathy and Sensibility in *Jane Eyre*” that a “dynamic competition between eye and ear, voice and vision, is signaled continually in the name ‘Eyre’” (122).

proximity with an “erring” Eyre that can neither be severed from nor conflated with the “I,” structuring both the interiority of the narrated Jane Eyre and the narrating voice of Jane Rochester. The novel’s application of this shameful dynamic in its narrative form and that form’s depiction of relationality and interiority reveal how Jane Eyre’s model of subjectivity and novelistic voice enables intimate relations of difference with others, rather than naturalizing normative subjectivity and relations through a sympathetic teleology.

The shameful dynamic characterizing Jane’s interiority, as much as her relations with others, is aligned with *Jane Eyre*’s autobiographical narration, as seen when Jane’s recognition of St. John as “erring as I” comes under the renewed assault of his sympathetic insistence, “steely ire,” and growing impatience over “so long a space for reflection and repentance” regarding his marriage proposal (363, 360). The present-tense narrator intervenes at a moment of sympathetic crisis:

I felt veneration for St. John—veneration so strong that its impetus thrust me at once to the point I had so long shunned. I was tempted to cease struggling with him—to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own. I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment. So I think at this hour, when I look back to the crisis through the quiet medium of time: I was unconscious of folly at the instant. (368)

The affective middle range, or “medium,” that the narrating Jane earlier denied her past *and* current self reemerges here, with slightly shifted emphasis, as an interpretive “medium” for retrospective self-perception, one with both temporal and affective valences. To “think” and “look back” at herself “through the quiet medium of time” is, for Jane, also to remember and narrate herself through the affective “medium” of shame. The exact temporal divide of “the quiet medium of time” remains vague, here, but the affective distance between ignorant experience and insightful retrospection takes the distinct form of shame over past “folly” and “error,” as the “quiet medium of

time” blends with the affective mode of shame that shapes and preserves such distance. This distance from sympathetic crisis is particularly reinforced by the present-tense narrating stance of retrospective shame. When Jane claims “I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt,” the difference between past and present self, experience and memory—in more literary terms, even story and discourse—all but collapses. The threat of collapse is linked to the more explicit problem of a rigid sympathetic standard for relations that can produce only sympathetic submission or alienating revolt. While shame offers a “medium” in relations with others, it additionally functions as a mediator between alienation from and undifferentiated continuity with retrospective conceptions of one’s past self. Accordingly, shame also maintains a space of intimate relational difference between story and narration in *Jane Eyre*’s autobiographical form.

In considering this retrospective narrative structure, we might usefully turn to Gérard Genette’s discussion of voice in *Narrative Discourse*, in which he provocatively alludes to the differentiating work that shame might perform. Observing the especially fragile temporal distinctions of interpolated narrating, or narrating “between the moments of action,” common in epistolary novels, Genette writes, “the extreme closeness of story to narrating produces . . . most often, a very subtle effect of friction (if I may call it that) between the slight temporal displacement of the narrative of events (‘Here is what happened to me today’) and the complete simultaneousness in the report of thoughts and feelings (‘Here is what I think about it this evening’).”⁵ This “friction” often entails a barely perceptible difference between

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 217-218. Further references will appear in the text.

story and narrating, hero and narrator: “Here, the narrator is at one and the same time still the hero and already someone else: the events of the day are already in the past, and the ‘point of view’ may have been modified since then; the feelings of the evening or the next day are fully of the present, and here focalization through the narrator is at the same time focalization through the hero” (218). In Genette’s example, from Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, one feeling particularly embodies the “friction” of past experience and present feelings:

Cécile Volanges writes to Mme. de Merteuil to tell her how she was seduced, last night, by Valmont, and to confide in her her remorse; the seduction scene is past, and with it the confusion that Cécile no longer feels, and can no longer even imagine; what remains is the shame, and a sort of stupor which is both incomprehension and discovery of oneself . . . The Cécile of yesterday, very near and already far off, is seen and spoken of by the Cécile of today. We have here two successive heroines, (only) the second of whom is (also) the narrator and gives her point of view, the point of view—displaced just enough to create dissonance—of the immediate *post-event* future. (218)

In general, Genette’s example portrays the “friction” inherent in interpolated narrating, a friction any number of emotions could join with the form to display. Yet in specifically bringing shame together with the “friction” produced by the epistolary mode, Genette’s illustration also suggests how this formal effect and shame amplify each other: shame, here, appears especially potent affective material for marking subtle distinctions of focalization and voice when temporal proximity threatens to elide them. A point of view tinged with shame—and its performance of disrupted identification—will be “displaced just enough to create dissonance” but not enough to break close contact with past perspectives. Through shame, the interpolated narration even more tangibly rubs up against an immediately preceding yet distinct affective experience, keeping the past self who is perceived as a compelling spectacle of shame “very near and already far off.”

Shame’s narrative function here recalls the retrospective narrative quality—as we have seen in earlier chapters—in Philip Fisher’s theorization of shame as a

“successor passion” that follows other “impassioned states.”⁶ In Fisher’s account, shame involves a successive “aftermath” moment in an individual’s emotional narrative; this moment retreats from the preceding “extrasocial” absorption of another passion, like anger, of which one is now ashamed, but shame enacts this retreat through a retrospective reexamination of one’s earlier passionate self-absorption, embedding while reinfecting from a more distanced perspective the “telling revelation” of one’s previous emotional excesses.⁷ Genette’s characterization of shameful retrospection provides a more directly literary application of shame’s “aftermath moment,” with shame working, much like in Fisher’s account, to fortify an autobiographical characterization containing “two successive heroines, (only) the second of whom is (also) the narrator.” Such “successive heroines” accumulate into a coherent identity—an autobiographical “I”—that changes and encompasses affective deviations over the temporal progression of the novel. Enwrapped within the dual signification of being both “seen and spoken of” by the narrator, the past heroine becomes, to borrow Fisher’s phrasing, a “telling revelation” of shame.

If we consider interpolated narrating not only as a broad narrative category, but in the specific context of the sentimental novel that often adopts this form, then the changing heroine represented through shame becomes especially significant. While Genette focuses primarily on the temporal “closeness of story to narrating” that can blur the experiencing and narrating heroine, the sentimental novel puts this temporal closeness within a larger relational and representational logic of sympathetic equivalence. In such a context, it is not just the affective differences between individuals that can fade, but also those within an individual character. In novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, for example, the mimetic structure of

⁶ Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65, 68.

one character sympathetically reproducing another's feelings extends to a mimetic structure of interiority, in which past and present selves replicate relatively unvarying emotional responses. By extension, the epistolary or journaling narrator tends to replicate and reinforce her earlier affective experience during a sympathetic revisiting. In a sentimental interpolated narrative, the "dissonance" and "friction" between experience and narrating that Genette particularly evokes through shame thus could not only instate fragile yet distinct differences in voice and focalization, but also, in so doing, disrupt the larger mimetic logic of the narrative.

Jane Eyre does not, of course, include interpolated narrating, falling firmly into the category of subsequent narrating, "the classical position of the past-tense narrative" (217). Nonetheless, shame's differentiating potential in interpolated narrating helps to isolate a similar effect in Brontë's novel. *Jane Eyre* incorporates shame's "friction" into a much wider temporal gap between story and narrating, reinforcing a "dissonance" between a past and present "I" that also disrupts sympathetic idealization and sentimental signification. In adapting shame's "friction" from interpolated narrating, *Jane Eyre* not only creates dissonance but also preserves an intimate closeness between a past and present self—a closeness which is not, as in interpolated narrating, enacted through temporal nearness. Harnessing shame's capacity to stage "successive heroines" who are both "very near and already far off" from one another, the novel creates, through shameful retrospection, a sense of affective contact in the place of literal temporal proximity. By stretching the temporal interval between experience and memory, Brontë pushes the limits of relational difference between the experiencing and narrating Jane, while using shame to preserve intimacy and prevent an alienating break within the autobiographical "I." Similar to the eighteenth-century novels Genette invokes, *Jane Eyre* "exploit[s] that narrative situation propitious to the most subtle and the most 'irritating' counterpoints: the

situation of the tiniest temporal interval” (218). Brontë, however, innovatively furthers this exploitation by replacing the irritation of the “tiniest temporal interval” with the purely affective substitute of shame’s differentiated closeness.⁸ *Jane Eyre* thus explores the possibilities of an intimate dynamic of shame in terms of social relations, interiority and narrative form.

While the narrating Jane “look[s] back to the crisis through the quiet medium of time,” her previous temptation to submerge herself in the “gulf of [St. John’s] existence” appears to resurface in the present, in the form of the subtle allure of a sympathetic merging into her past self. As the narration lingers on the moment of crisis, its repeated, deictic “now” begins to blur narrative levels, as if pushing desires of the past into the “now” of the narrating present. Jane recalls, “I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment.” The subsequent interjection—“So I think at this hour, when I look back to the crisis through the quiet medium of time: I was unconscious of folly at the instant”—at first seems to reassert a clear border between present and past thought, between “this hour” and “the instant.” This border, however, is undone by Jane’s situating of the ambiguous temporality of the preceding *nows* into an unambiguously present thought—“now,” “at this hour,” Jane can “think” what remained “unconscious . . . at the instant”—thus further blurring past and present temporalities, even as they are ostensibly being defined.

⁸ Susan Lanser suggestively reads Brontë’s engagement with epistolary form as part of “the narrative practices that create *Jane Eyre*’s singular voice,” a “narrative voice, which has been perceived as almost tyrannical in its power to impose a stance” and historically “has no precedent in the authority it claims for a female personal voice” (182, 176-77). For Lanser a new “kind of public epistolarity becomes the narrative sign, then, of Jane’s quest for . . . a blend of intimacy and autonomy”; but Lanser implies that this blend is a reaction against (rather than, as I argue, an extension of) Jane’s experiences of shame, when she asks, “Who can blame her (to paraphrase Jane) if, abandoned by family and publicly shamed, Jane might anxiously seek the approval of a larger audience?” (186). See Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992).

Through the same dynamic of conditional shame that she uses to negotiate relations with others in the story, however, the narrating Jane resists sympathetic submission to her past self without falling into self-estrangement. Repeating the layered temporalities and significations of St. John's shameful unveiling, a look—here a “look back”—reveals the “error” of a spectacular “instant” that is enfolded in the prolonged, reflective “think[ing] at this hour.” In her earlier recognition of St. John's error, Jane relaxes the rigid assignment of shame as well as the sympathetic pull of his shameful spectacle by embedding his concrete, instantaneous exposure into the duration of an “analysis” that determines he is as “erring as I.” When Jane unveils her own past “error” and “folly” to her narrating self and to the reader, a similar interplay of immediate, visualized exposure and subsequent thinking occurs—one that is now mapped onto a mode of memory that intersects with a specific literary form, retrospective autobiographical narration. In addition to pairing the signifying technique of immediate visual arrests with the longer cognitive duration of “analysis”—in this case, specifically of narration—Jane applies to her own self-assessment the mitigating distribution of shame that she earlier enacts with the formulation that St. John is “erring as I.” Jane's error is distributed, here, not between different characters, but between multiple, differentiated moments making up the “I.” The narrator's introduction of an even earlier “error of principle” (in response to Rochester's seduction) places that error in a comparison with her “error of judgment” that destabilizes any rigid assignment of shame to past or present selves. For Jane may have been “a fool both times,” but she did not in fact yield to Rochester's seduction, anticipating that she also will not yield to St. John's tempting proposal. The narration emphasizes the conditional status of what “would have been an error” in both cases. This conditional status alleviates the narrator's present shame as well, since it relies on capturing a fleeting “instant” of “folly” which the temporal

progression of subsequent events will empty of much of its actual “error.” The conditional status of both errors brings past and present selves into a relational dynamic of mutual proximity to conditional shame—a shame that can circulate without fixing anywhere permanently—and the reader, too, is drawn into this shameful dynamic. The erring Jane of past experience is exposed to the narrator in an “instant” of being “unconscious of folly”; the narrator similarly exposes herself to her reader in the present-tense act of “think[ing] at this hour” that contains the past “unconscious” moment with particular clarity. *Jane Eyre* thus enacts a dynamic of proximity to shame across relationality, interiority, and narrative form that provides a mode of readerly engagement as well.

READING SHAME: HELEN BURNS

In the sequence at Lowood School, and especially in Jane’s relationship with Helen Burns, Brontë most directly connects the relational possibilities of shame to a literary hermeneutics and to the formal permutations of sentimental signification that I have described as shameful signification. *Jane Eyre* positions shame as a relational, representational and reading mode in the depiction of Jane’s childhood encounters with Helen at Lowood. We see the problem of individualized subjectivity and social relation that haunts Jane’s first days at Lowood in her fuzzy perception of her new surroundings, and especially the other girls, as an indistinguishable mass. She can only register the “hum of many voices” and their seemingly “countless” number, and the difficulty of differentiation spreads from Jane’s surroundings to her thoughts, even impinging on narration: “My reflections were too undefined and fragmentary to merit record: I hardly yet knew where I was” (37, 42). Only two “marked event[s]” cut through the perceptual and descriptive haze of Jane’s first day: Helen reading and Helen being publicly shamed (44). In each instance, Jane recognizes another

individual and interrogates possible forms of intimate interaction with her. The narration similarly finds in Helen an individual character around which to organize Jane's past perceptions and present memories: Helen, and Jane's reactions to her, "merit record." Through the same dynamic of shame that she uses to negotiate her relationship with Helen, the narrating Jane resists both sympathetic submission to her past self and self-estrangement. *Jane Eyre* enacts this dynamic of shame in terms of not only relationality, but also interiority and narrative form—a dynamic that, as we will see, provides a significant model of readerly engagement as well.

When Helen first comes into Jane's view, she conjures the prospect of sympathetic identification:

I saw a girl sitting on a stone bench near; she was bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title—it was "Rasselas;" a name that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive. In turning a leaf she happened to look up, and I said to her directly;—"Is your book interesting?" I had already formed the intention of asking her to lend it to me some day . . . I hardly know where I found the hardihood thus to open a conversation with a stranger; the step was contrary to my nature and habits: but I think her occupation touched a chord of sympathy somewhere; for I too liked reading, though of a frivolous and childish kind; I could not digest or comprehend the serious or substantial. (42-43)

Jane initially attempts to assimilate the "stranger" to her investment in sympathetic likeness, and, by staging this potentially sympathetic scene specifically as a scene of reading, Brontë extends the subsequent disruption of Jane's limited sympathetic idealization to literary investments. For the "chord of sympathy" is plucked only to be loosened: a sympathetic paradigm of close identification with novelistic content, as well as other readers' responses, is frustrated when Jane actually looks inside the coveted book, "a brief examination" of which "convinced me that the contents were less taking than the title: 'Rasselas' looked dull to my trifling taste; I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii; no bright variety seemed to spread over the closely printed pages" (43). Jane's interest in Helen persists in spite of their discordant

reading practices, however. The “chord of sympathy” that can be touched through reading—as a generalized activity—is made to accommodate differences in understanding and affective engagement. Like shame—and sharing its paradigmatic bent posture, here “bent over a book”—the scene of reading provides a form that can bind those drawn to reading both despite and through pointed divergences of reading practice and response. To distinguish Brontë’s conceptualization of reading from more fixed sympathetic hermeneutics and sentimental signification, it is useful to recall the constitutive aspects of Adam Smith’s classic sympathetic scene, as well as Smith’s and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s shameful reconfigurations of it, which I trace in my introduction: the scenario, the signifying body, and interior emotion. Smith and Sedgwick help us conceptualize how the scenario of shame might position a spectacularly signifying body to exert an emotional pull akin to that of the sentimental spectacle, but producing significant deviations between the actual interior emotions of those embodying and witnessing the signified shame. In Brontë’s scene reading, broadly defined, similarly acts as a compelling scenario with a strong relational pull: Jane is initially intrigued simply because “I too liked reading.” The signifying body, here, entails both a physical body—Helen’s bent posture—and a textual one—the book cover bearing the “strange, and consequently attractive” title of *Rasselas*. Unlike the rigid sympathetic continuity of signifying form and interior emotional content, however, there is room for variance. The actual “contents” of *Rasselas* diverge between “dull” and absorbing, depending on the distinct responses of readers whose own interior emotional content—while evoked by the shared posture and scenario of reading—can diverge as well without breaking the bond of reading.

Following this initial upset of a strict sympathetic connection, Jane continues to attend to the “stranger,” and an intense bond between Jane and Helen develops that is especially forged through shameful reading. While remaining an explicit figure of

reading, Helen also morphs increasingly into the text Jane most longs to read—and which can be most intimately and closely read through shame. In the second “marked event” of Jane’s initial day at Lowood, Helen’s shameful “disgrace,” like her reading, draws Jane into a compelling spectacle that pulls the novel’s relational alternative to sympathy into sharper focus (44). Before turning to this spectacle, however, we should first consider another, later exhibition of Helen’s shame that threatens to push Jane past relational disconnection, and into angry, antisocial alienation. The representational features of this scene of humiliating exposure illuminate those aspects of sentimental signification that Brontë seeks to revise in other scenes of more conditional shameful exhibition. The scene also occurs during Jane’s stay at Lowood, and in it Helen is literally transformed into a text of shame: “Miss Scatcherd wrote in conspicuous characters on a piece of pasteboard the word ‘Slatern,’ and bound it like a phylactery round Helen’s large, mild, intelligent, and benign-looking forehead. She wore it till evening, patient, unresentful, regarding it as a deserved punishment. The moment Miss Scatcherd withdrew after afternoon-school, I ran to Helen, tore it off, and thrust it into the fire: the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek; for the spectacle of her sad resignation gave me an intolerable pain at the heart” (64). Though Helen is shamed, here, her shame has much of the representational rigidity of Smith’s sympathetic rack, rather than his shameful pillory. The shaming scenario, imprinted onto the signifying body with a horrifyingly fixed materiality and explicitness of signification, secures, in turn, the interior content of that body: Helen regards the sign of “Slatern” “as a deserved punishment.” An excruciating continuity and transparency of sentimental signification traps Jane, as spectator, between the extremes of hyper-socialized submission—akin to Helen’s response here—or antisocial revolt. Jane’s responding anger not only severs connection with clearly

oppressive forces, represented by Miss Scatcherd, but also imperils any affective continuity between herself and Helen: Jane feels “the fury of which [Helen] was incapable.” Jane’s response here approaches—as it does in an earlier scene in which Helen’s shame is branded directly onto her body through a beating—“a sentiment of unavailing and impotent anger” (46).

Yet the first shaming of Helen that Jane witnesses—to return to the second “marked event” of her first day at Lowood—strikingly contrasts with the inflexible signification represented by the material label of “Slatern.” Similar to Smith’s pillory and Sedgwick’s thought experiment discussed in my introduction, a scenario demanding shame here circulates a palpably communicative feeling that still fails to define entirely any individual’s interior content, or to produce strict identification between individuals:

The only marked event of the afternoon was, that I saw the girl with whom I had conversed in the verandah, dismissed in disgrace, by Miss Scatcherd, from a history class, and sent to stand in the middle of the large schoolroom. The punishment seemed to me in a high degree ignominious, especially for so great a girl—she looked thirteen or upwards. I expected she would show signs of great distress and shame; but to my surprise she neither wept nor blushed: composed, though grave, she stood, the central mark of all eyes. “How can she bear it so quietly—so firmly?” I asked of myself. “Were I in her place, it seems to me I should wish the earth to open and swallow me up. She looks as if she were thinking of something beyond her punishment—beyond her situation: of something not round her nor before her. I have heard of day-dreams—is she in a day-dream now? Her eyes are fixed on the floor, but I am sure they do not see it—her sight seems turned in, gone down into her heart: she is looking at what she can remember, I believe; not at what is really present. I wonder what sort of a girl she is—whether good or naughty?” (44-45)

As in the previous scene of reading, Jane is frustrated in any easy application of a sympathetic hermeneutics to Helen’s compelling spectacle. She fails to trace the expected continuity of shaming scenario and concrete physical signs—“signs of great distress and shame”—as Helen “neither wept nor blushed,” and appears “composed, though grave.” Instead, the bowed head—“her eyes fixed on the floor”—again allows

for diverse interior content, bringing Helen and Jane into a shameful scenario whose form nonetheless accommodates other feelings, and affectively binds Jane to Helen despite her sense of their divergent emotions and thoughts.

The spectacle of Helen's extreme, visual exposure as "she stood, the central mark of all eyes" further is alleviated of an all-consuming shame by layered acts of thinking—Jane thinking that Helen "looks as if she were thinking of something beyond her punishment—beyond her situation." Through this "thinking," Helen attains some distance from the explicit affective demand of her shaming "punishment." The precise structure of this thought is provocative: Jane imagines that Helen finds relief from a highly visible shame, even as that spectacle draws others toward her, because "she is looking at what she can remember, I believe; not at what is really present." Helen's remembering doubles Jane's own narratorial stance of establishing proximity to shame through retrospection. That Helen's remembering is accessible only through Jane's telling about it highlights the way in which it figures Jane's narrative act, emphasizing how certain forms of both perceiving and telling about shame can enhance the possibilities of a conditional relation to its punitive spectacle.

Jane's own remembered perceptions of Helen's acts of remembering capture the individuated intimacy enabled by shame that Brontë further accentuates through effects of focalization. When Jane thinks, "Were I in her place, it seems to me I should wish the earth to open and swallow me up," she focalizes an overwhelming perception of shame both on behalf of herself and Helen and, in a sense, for no one. Through what remains a merely hypothetical focalization of self-eviscerating shame, Brontë enacts an intimate contact between the two girls' still distinct thoughts and feelings, and a friction between each girl's interior emotional content and the form of

shame's spectacle.⁹ For Jane is not "in her place," and recognizes as much in her thoughts, which emphasize her own distance from the shame she only hypothetically perceives. Neither does the perception of intense shame appear to apply to the stoic Helen's actual feelings in that shaming "place." This hypothetical focalization of shame captures shame's potential to combine fragile yet marked distinctions with a tangible sense of closeness, as Jane and Helen are drawn near both the "punishment" of shame and each other's interiority, yet escape undifferentiated merging. In its absolute exposure of the experiencing Jane's thoughts, the hypothetical focalization of shame provides a formal, interior equivalent of the scene of shame's ability to create a spectacularly visualized body that can bind individuals in relational difference. Further, Jane here—in her keen engagement that is not reducible to identification—offers a figure for the reader's own relation to such novelistic spectacles of shame.

While the formulation "Were I in her place" gives Jane and Helen some distance from the threat of overwhelming shame when Jane actually *is* put "in [Helen's] place," such distance is still preserved through layers of retrospection that come together within Jane's interiority. Soon after Helen's public shaming, Jane finds herself hoisted on a stool in the schoolroom for Mr. Brocklehurst's public condemnation of her, and the perception of shame that Jane had experienced in relation to Helen's exposure enables a meeting with her own past self as well as with Helen:

There was I, then, mounted aloft: I, who had said I could not bear the shame of standing on my natural feet in the middle of the room, was now exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy. What my sensations were, no language can describe: but just as they all rose, stifling my breath and constricting my throat, a girl came up and passed me: in passing, she lifted up her eyes. What a

⁹ I draw the term "hypothetical focalization" from David Herman's work on "the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or might have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue" (303). See David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002). Herman also develops the concept in his article "Hypothetical Focalization," *Narrative* 2, no. 3 (1994): 230-53.

strange light inspired them! What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up! It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in transit. I mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up my head, and took a firm stand on the stool. Helen Burns asked some slight question about her work of Miss Smith, was chidden for the triviality of the inquiry, returned to her place, and smiled at me as she again went by. What a smile! I remember it now, and I know that it was the effluence of fine intellect, of true courage; it lit up her marked lineaments, her thin face, her sunken grey eye, like a reflection from the aspect of an angel. (58-59)

The narrator here brings her present-tense “I” into retrospective contact with two past “I”s: the “I, then, mounted aloft” and the “I, who had said I could not bear the shame.” The experiencing Jane, “mounted aloft,” engages in the same act of remembering a past proximity to shame as the narrating “I,” offering a model for the narrator’s ability, through shameful retrospection, to bring together yet differentiate between moments making up the self. The complex interaction of closely connected yet distinct “I”s enabled by Jane’s “expos[ure] to general view on a pedestal of infamy” encapsulates not just shame’s relational possibilities, but the affectively charged narrative structure of *Jane Eyre*’s retrospective autobiographical form and its shame-delineated space of intimate relational difference between story and narrating.

Jane’s schoolroom exposure culminates in a moment that conveys the intimate friction such spectacles of shame can produce. The narrating *and* experiencing Janes’ memories of differentiated past selves are linked to another significant memory related to Jane’s shaming—Helen’s smile. The affectionate observation “What a smile!”—like the memory of shame—briefly bridges the voice and focalization of the experiencing and narrating Jane, while the subsequent interjection, “I remember it now,” reinstates the difference of time.¹⁰ The smile brings Jane’s differentiated “I”s

¹⁰ James Phelan’s concept of “dual focalization” in character narration—“a narrative situation . . . [that] involves a narrator perceiving his former self’s perceptions”—helps to describe this moment and to explain its effect of intimate differentiation (215). As Phelan suggests in a discussion of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, “story and discourse overlap” in moments of dual focalization, but important distinctions are preserved insofar as “the narrator’s focalization does not drop away. Instead, the narrator’s focalization contains the character’s” (118-19). See James Phelan, *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005).

together with Helen in a moment of acute connection that—unlike the sympathetic paradigm—depends on distinctions within the self and between the self and others. The affective intensity of the smile derives in part from the sequence of shifting postures that precedes it and wavers between relationality and disconnection: Helen “lifted up her eyes” to make contact with Jane’s bowed head; and Jane in turn “lifted up [her] head,” as Helen “passed.” These postures—variously mismatched and corresponding, rather than stagnantly mirroring—culminate in the momentary, intimate contact of the smile—a moment the narrator lingers over still.

The affective intensity of Helen’s smile further derives from the ways in which it makes manifest much of the agency and intimacy embedded in the previous scene of Jane watching Helen’s “disgrace.” In the earlier spectacle Helen stood still with “her eyes . . . fixed on the floor”: but now Helen moves, lifts her gaze, and smiles, actively responding to and physically advancing the reach that Jane had before extended toward her in thought only. Helen’s smile and Jane’s response enact the intimate differentiation of Jane’s formulation “Were I in her place” as a now tangible point of connection, as Helen directly acknowledges Jane’s shameful scenario while also prompting her to move beyond its limiting, oppressive contours. And Jane’s own layered memories at this moment, producing palpable contact between past and present selves around the spectacle of shame, further draw out the processes implicit in Helen’s earlier “look[ing] as if she were thinking of something beyond her punishment” because she seemed to be “looking at what she can remember.” The convergence of these two scenes’ spectacles of shame particularly illustrates how the autobiographical subject’s recognition and staging of differences within a coherent self can inform an increased attention to—even seeking of—compelling difference in others. To recognize, here, how *Jane Eyre*’s autobiographical narrative of development reinforces the novel’s investment in relational difference is to begin to

challenge the common critique of *Jane Eyre*'s interiority and voice, especially from her concluding position as a bourgeois domestic woman, as effecting a normalizing and exclusionary idealization of sympathetic identification.

SHAME'S "TERRIBLE SPECTACLE"

Any unsettling of *Jane Eyre* as a narrative idealizing sympathetic union must account for Jane's final romantic reunion with Rochester, and particularly for the two spectacles that seem to position this reunion as a highly sympathetic one: Rochester's inexplicable call, which leaves Jane's "flesh quiver[ing] on my bones," and his disfigurement, which renders Jane, through his devotion to and physical dependence on her, "absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (369, 397). To be sure, each of these spectacles touches a palpable "chord of sympathy," but they also function beyond the immediacy of their purely sympathetic displays. Indeed, it is through subsequent narrations of these seemingly sympathetic spectacles, by Jane and by other characters, that Brontë establishes an erotics of shame—an erotics that constitutes the novel's affective closure in a form that also, I suggest, helps to keep *Jane Eyre* open to readers' diverse engagements and critical concerns.

Rochester's call to Jane might at first appear the antithesis of, even the antidote for, the cry "for shame!" that forces the young, alienated Jane—"a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst" the Reeds—into the red-room (12). When Jane, despite their gaping geographic separation, experiences a heightened sense of Rochester's feelings, her histrionic body responds to Rochester's emotion with classic sympathetic susceptibility: "My heart beat fast and thick," then "stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities," she explains (369). Along with her sympathetic, bodily response, however, Jane also registers a voice: "I saw nothing: but I heard a voice somewhere

cry—‘Jane! Jane! Jane!’ nothing more” (369). While an “inexpressible feeling” threatens to merge completely with Jane’s responsive body, the compelling, individuated voice remains distinct, for “it was the voice of a human being—a known, loved, well-remembered voice—that of Edward Fairfax Rochester” (369).

This deviation from the sympathetic paradigm continues, veering closer to the cry for shame, as the following narration explains Rochester’s “cry” by linking it to his desperate “call” to his wife, Bertha Mason. When Jane investigates the meaning of her uncanny experience by returning to Thornfield Hall, an inn-keeper provides background on the “terrible spectacle” of its burning and Rochester’s doomed attempt to remove his wife (375):

He . . . went back to get his mad wife out of her cell. And then they called out to him that she was on the roof; where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off; I saw and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed Mr. Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof: we heard him call “Bertha!” We saw him approach her; and then, ma’am, she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. (377)

Rochester’s thoroughgoing public exposure and reverberating call to Bertha provide his intimate cry—“Jane! Jane! Jane!”—with a dramatically humiliating source. The spectacle on the rooftop, widely witnessed and heard “a mile off,” literalizes a scenario that Rochester only imagines early in his relationship with Jane, in his coy hint that he has hidden “defects,” “a past existence, a series of deeds, a colour of life to contemplate within my own breast, which might well call my sneers and censures from my neighbours to myself” (118-19). Rochester gestures at self-exposure in this early statement, but firmly limits this possibility to private “contemplat[ion] within my own breast.” The actual revelation of his “defects” and “past existence” to the surrounding neighborhood thus dramatically inverts a tactic of not just privacy, but extreme secrecy and disavowal, that Rochester has taken toward the shame that Bertha

represents for him. For Rochester's ensconcing of Bertha in a "secret inner cabinet" of Thornfield encapsulates a simultaneous hoarding and denial of shame that characterizes his relation to Bertha and to his own past self. When full disclosure of his past to Jane becomes inevitable, Rochester's account emphasizes his tendency to displace his own personal shame and error onto his demonized wife—a strategy that constitutes not distancing but near-denial of his own proximity to shame. Rochester bemoans the humiliating contagion that he locates firmly in Bertha: "In the eyes of the world I was doubtless covered with grimy dishonour: but I resolved to be clean in my own sight—and to the last I repudiated the contamination of her crimes, and wrenched myself from connection with her mental defects. Still, society associated my name and person with hers!" (270). The suggestion of "Hope" to return to England and hide his mad wife is the extreme of such absolute location of shame within Bertha: "That woman, who has so abused your long-suffering—so sullied your name; so outraged your honour; so blighted your youth—is not your wife ... Let her identity, her connection with yourself, be buried in oblivion; you are bound to impart them to no living being. Place her in safety and comfort: shelter her degradation with secrecy, and leave her" (272). Rochester's intolerance for personal shame—or even closeness to shame—creates an absolute rupture in any relation with Bertha. He tells Jane, "I found her nature wholly alien to mine," and this "alien" quality can only produce, for him, "extreme disgust": she becomes "what I most hate" (269, 272, 264). The relational rupture extends beyond Bertha to his own memories: Rochester's retrospective narration reveals estrangement from his "mad wife" and his past self.

Rochester's rejection of difference and disavowal of related shame takes particularly dramatic form in his struggles with Bertha, but the limitations of his approach also shape his romance with Jane. Jane's rejection of Rochester's proposal to become his mistress should be read, to some extent, as a rejection of Rochester's

absolute denial of shame and difference. For Rochester's seduction is, like St. John's, a sympathetic seduction that is given a threateningly invasive cast:

After a youth and manhood passed half in unutterable misery and half dreary in solitude, I have for the first time found what I can truly love—I have found *you*. You are my sympathy—my better self—my good angel—I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted, lovely; a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you—and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me in one. (277)

Rochester's sympathetic idealization has a coercive edge, requiring Jane to embody his feelings and "my better self." His violent rejection of the dissimilar as the wholly alien, in relation to Bertha, finds a counterpart in the demand that what he "can truly love" manifest sympathetic equivalence. His sympathetic conception of romance expels disparity, and also makes no room for shame. Rochester's fantasy of romantic escape with Jane ominously parallels his imprisonment of Bertha in its clear compartmentalization of shame. While Rochester envisions violently containing all shame by "shut[ting] up Thornfield Hall ... nail[ing] up the front door, and board[ing] the lower windows" with Bertha still inside, Jane would be positioned abroad, similarly confined in a "secure sanctuary from hateful reminiscences, from unwelcome intrusion—even from falsehood and slander" (264-265). Rochester's proposition is a sympathetic temptation that threatens to sever Jane from shame and memory—a proposition she painfully but decidedly rejects. Rochester's call on the rooftop thus places him in spectacular relation to the shame he has so persistently hidden—now given concrete form in the figure of Bertha and in the crowds who hear and see him.

"Shame," writes Michael Warner, "is an experience of exposure, in which I become suddenly an object through the eyes of another; it thus resonates powerfully in situations of erotic objectification, visibility, and display."¹¹ Indeed, at the point of

¹¹ Michael Warner, "Pleasures and Dangers of Shame," in *Gay Shame*, eds. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009): 290.

Rochester's dramatic display on the rooftop such shameful exposure has accumulated an intense erotic allure in Brontë's narrative, having provided Jane with a space of intimacy with others, and even her own memories. From the beginning, Jane's relationship with Rochester is driven by an erotics of shameful exposure: in this sense, the "terrible spectacle" of his long-hidden shame finally delivers on the eroticized, potential surfacing of error and degradation that has enticed Jane. Like Helen, Rochester is a text whose vulnerable physical surface fascinates Jane, especially as it suggests depths that Jane desires to read through shame. As we have seen, when Rochester intently gazes at Thornfield Hall early in their relationship, Jane just as intently scrutinizes the mysterious glint in his eyes, puzzling over the "pain, shame, ire" she perceives wrestling in the "quivering conflict in the large pupil dilating under his ebon eyebrow," and critics often have turned to the roles of rebellious "ire" and sympathetic "pain" in reading Jane's conflicted romance with Rochester and the ideological and aesthetic implications of its resolution (125). Yet Jane's ruminations on the happiness in store for Blanche Ingram, as Rochester's intended bride, suggest that shame, particularly, constitutes the desired depth of Rochester's impenetrable eye, and that its materialization would offer for her something akin to erotic climax and marital closure. Jane worries about her increasing tendency toward "forgetting all his faults, for which I had once kept a sharp look-out," and reinstates the watch:

And as for the vague something—was it a sinister or a sorrowful, a designing or a desponding expression?—that opened upon a careful observer, now and then, in his eye and closed again before one could fathom the strange depth partially disclosed; that something which used to make me fear and shrink, as if I had been wandering amongst volcanic-looking hills, and had suddenly felt the ground quiver, and seen it gape; that something I at intervals beheld still, and with throbbing heart, but not with palsied nerves. Instead of wishing to shun, I longed only to dare—to divine it; and I thought Miss Ingram happy, because one day she might look into the abyss at her leisure, explore its secrets, and analyse their nature. (165)

Jane's imagining of the fleeting revelation of Rochester's secret as a sudden

“gap[ing]” of the “ground” she traverses echoes the imagery of her conditional relation to Helen’s shameful exposure: “Were I in her place, it seems to me I should wish the earth to open and swallow me up.” The spectacular surfacing of Rochester’s shameful, “vague something” on the burning rooftop—and Jane’s own mediated contact with this spectacle through the inn-keeper’s later narration of it—allows her once again to approach the “open[ing] and swallow[ing]” earth that figures the *frisson* of partial contact with another’s shameful exposure. For as with Helen’s display, Rochester’s spectacle of shame produces a compelling form with uncertain content, a form that preserves his interior emotions as “a strange depth” still only “partially disclosed.” Reading Rochester’s call to Jane in relation to his call to Bertha, and especially the shame that it signifies, illuminates the full erotic significance of the oft-cited romantic call and response, and allows it a greater textual function than the consolidation of a normalizing sympathetic bond between the lovers. The fervent call and response between Rochester and Jane presents a moment of precarious intimate connection, the erotics of which depends, like the smile Jane shares with Helen, on proximity to a shameful spectacle that both exposes another and enticingly obscures the full transparency of that other’s distinct interiority.

While the spectacle of Rochester’s shame forwards the novel’s erotic resolution, it is also significant that Bertha Mason has been incorporated into the scenario. As we have seen in Jane’s shame-fueled relations with Helen, and her own past selves, the scene of shame in *Jane Eyre* is also, often, a scene of productive individuation and intimate relation through difference. Yet Bertha, as many critics have contended, is the character who most pressures the novel’s capacity to tolerate difference.¹² From this perspective, Bertha’s integration into a relational spectacle of

¹² In his analysis of Bertha Mason’s central role in readings of *Jane Eyre*, Laurence Lerner usefully outlines three common critical approaches to Bertha: “Bertha as representing Jane’s repressed sexual desire, Bertha as representing Jane’s suppressed anger, and . . . Bertha-Antoinette as representing the

potential individuation—with Rochester, her most virulent critic and oppressor, no less—suggests Brontë’s attempt to push the limit of difference that the novel’s dynamic of shame can accommodate. The violent death of Bertha, as she “lay smashed on the pavement,” undeniably marks this limit, and shame’s potential for damaging effects and normalizing demarcations (377). Bertha’s frantic, ultimately self-destructive gestures and unintelligible response to Rochester’s call seem designed to keep her on the cusp of relationality: the legibility of Jane’s answer (“I am coming”) to Rochester’s cry of “Jane! Jane! Jane!” is withheld from Bertha, whom onlookers have seen “waving her arms” and “shouting out” before, in response to Rochester’s “call” of “Bertha!” she “yelled, and gave a spring” (369, 377). But Rochester’s call to Bertha, in its partial parallels to his romantic cry to Jane, also offers a fleeting extension of individualized identity and relationality to the one character to whom they have been consistently denied—both by Rochester and by the text more generally. We can more fully understand the complex, and often contradictory, aesthetic and cultural impact of Victorian shame (and Victorian emotions more broadly) by recognizing that here, the novel allows Bertha the most legibility and recognition she receives from other characters, not in spite of shame’s exclusionary effects, but through shame’s relational dynamic.

Brontë’s novel further counters the embodiments of shame’s indisputable violence with the striking revision of shame’s form in subsequent narrations of Rochester’s injuries. When Jane reunites with Rochester, he relates the “terrible spectacle” of Thornfield’s burning, Bertha’s end, and his own misfortunes in more indirect fashion than the inn-keeper, interpreting the events, and especially his maimed

colonial subject” (279). Across each broadly defined approach, Bertha tends to be read as the figure of excessive or foreign elements—whether elements of desire, emotion, or racial and national identity—that the novel represses or violently marginalizes. For a discussion of representative criticism, see Laurence Lerner, “Bertha and the Critics,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44, no. 3 (1989): 273-300.

body, as a just and long-overdue shaming punishment for “my stiff-necked rebellion”: “Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me. . . . *His* chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever. You know I was proud of my strength; but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness” (393). As his narration continues, Rochester’s cry to Jane is positioned as the direct outgrowth of his humbling—particularly his physical humiliation. Rochester’s renarrating of his earlier cry places him in a relational dynamic with Jane organized around his humiliated body, a dynamic that echoes the emotional proximity established between Helen and Jane around their physical exposures in the schoolroom. Jane further renarrates this moment for the reader in a way that remakes her bond with Helen, bringing both Rochester and the reader into the scene. In Jane’s previous perception, Helen had alleviated the shame of her spectacular punishment through a physical posture suggesting memory: “Her eyes are fixed on the floor, but I am sure they do not see it—her sight seems turned in, gone down into her heart: she is looking at what she can remember, I believe; not at what is really present.” Now Rochester stands, like Helen before him, “bending his sightless eyes to the earth . . . in mute devotion,” while Jane repeats Helen’s reflective turn “into her heart”: “Reader . . . I listened to Mr. Rochester’s narrative; but made no disclosure in return. . . . I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart” (394). The narrator explicitly invokes the “Reader” as a witnessing participant, invited into the erotic structure of shame and positioned much like the young Jane in her prior scene of intimacy with Helen, which this scene reenacts—a reenactment that constitutes romantic reunion with Rochester.

When Jane recollects Rochester’s physical dependence on her due to his blindness, she lingers on his seemingly shameful body, which encompasses not just “Divine justice” but also bitter-sweet love: “there was a pleasure in my services, most

full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation” (397). Jane’s description emphasizes the form of shame—present in Rochester’s physical condition and its expected “painful shame or damping humiliation”—while embedding this form in acts of narration that mitigate shame’s hold. Jane alleviates Rochester’s sense of shame by “putting into words” the world he can no longer see, thus disrupting the rigid alignment of shameful scenario, signifying body, and interior emotional content that his lost “strength” initially inflicted on him (397). Revising the indelible signification of absolute shame into more conditional shame, Jane also claims the happiness she had earlier imagined for Blanche Ingram: Jane now “might look into the abyss” of her husband’s shameful eye “at her leisure,” but she also relieves the shame caused by that blinded eye by looking and narrating on its behalf. The possibility of revising the shamefully signifying body further materializes when Rochester’s blindness begins to heal, but not completely, and not before it “drew us so very near” (397). When Jane first discerns the “quivering conflict” of “pain, shame, ire” in Rochester’s eye, he rejects it as posing “obstacles to happiness,” but her concluding narration of and for this eye brings shame into close and productive contact with other feelings—with a “sad[ness]” and pain inextricable from “pleasure”—such that “Edward and I, then, are happy” and “those we most love are happy likewise” (125, 398). Shame—as much as “pain” and “ire”—facilitates happiness: in both preserving and reworking the form of “painful shame or damping humiliation,” Brontë’s novel reimagines felicitous selfhood and relationality.

FEMINISM AND NOVELISTIC FEELING

Yet however comfortably happy Jane Eyre seems by the novel’s end, Brontë’s heroine also raises numerous, often uncomfortable questions about the costs of such happiness for the self and for others. For contemporary feminist criticism, for which

Jane Eyre remains a touchstone text, such questions often revolve around the costs of emotional identification, cast specifically in terms of anger and sympathy. Observing the “highly charged contentious response” *Jane Eyre* continues to elicit, Cora Kaplan postulates that Brontë’s novel “condenses unresolved questions in and for feminism today,” questions concerning how “the status of female feelings in feminism” relates to “the status of female individualism.”¹³ In her characterization of the “emotive history” of this criticism, Kaplan foregrounds the specific feelings of anger and sympathy and links them to the issue of “identification”: a history of “angry or sympathetic identification with the text” of *Jane Eyre* “and its heroine” has, she suggests, also “produced a second order set of feelings about the critical debates, for which, nevertheless, *Jane Eyre* remains a referent.”¹⁴ The most influential exemplar of “angry . . . identification” would, of course, be Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, with its centerpiece reading of anger in *Jane Eyre*. In mapping a feminist poetics centered on anger, this landmark study entails problematic demands for emotional identifications that define the “female” and the “feminist.” While the madwoman figures an attractive “rebellious feminism” for Gilbert and Gubar, the subversive energy of anger must be distinguished from potentially antisocial or illegible madness, and the challenges of maintaining this distinction appear to motivate the claim that the angry double in nineteenth-century literature serves to “act out the subversive impulses *every woman inevitably feels* when she contemplates the ‘deep-rooted’ evils of patriarchy.”¹⁵ The madwoman is kept legible and relational as “every woman,” but at the risk of universalizing female emotional makeup—what “every woman inevitably feels”—through a hermeneutics of identification involving the shared anger of literary characters, authors and readers. Thus in their reading of

¹³ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25, 31.

¹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, 338, 77, my emphasis.

Jane Eyre, Gilbert and Gubar's emphasis on a "constitutional *ire*"—in various stages of repression—that emotionally defines not only Jane Eyre and her double, Bertha Mason, but all of the other major female characters, begins to function less as an uncovering of personal emotion and more as a pervasive mandate for truly feminist—or even female—feeling.¹⁶ In order for the angry double to qualify as a subversive rather than a monitory literary figure, the author also must manifest traceable identification with her rage, and, for the feminist potential of this identification to take full effect, the reader must acknowledge—and even better, share—this anger as well.

In highlighting the problems of such universalizing of gendered emotion, revisionist feminist criticism of *Jane Eyre* has often focused on sympathy in order to pose the risk of a coercive idealization of emotional identification. In her study *How Novels Think*, for example, Nancy Armstrong positions *Jane Eyre*'s romantic resolution as representative of the Victorian novel's "project of universalizing the individual subject" through the "fantasy of domestic plentitude or wholeness of being within the household."¹⁷ Armstrong does not discuss sympathy explicitly in her reading of *Jane Eyre*, but she situates the novel's idealization of naturalized domesticity—which, she claims, reproduces emotional connections within and between "almost indistinguishable" happy homes as novelistic closure—as exemplary of a restrictive phase of a paradoxically self-regulating individualism that she links, in her introduction, to the "logic of sympathy."¹⁸ Amit Rai and Lorri Nandrea also

¹⁶ Ibid., 349. Gilbert and Gubar read Miss Temple's superficial "ladylike virtues," for example, as a disguise for "a 'sewer' of fury beneath this temple"; and Helen Burns' "self-renunciation" is similarly symptomatic, for "despite her contemplative purity, there is evidently a 'sewer' of concealed resentment in Helen Burns, just as there is in Miss Temple" (346). Indeed, Miss Temple is not *just* tranquil; neither is Helen Burns simply resigned. But affective nuance begins to be effaced by Gilbert and Gubar's insistent retrieval of anger, which positions emotional differences between female characters as more a matter of degree than kind, and anger as the "constitutional" base for all substantial claims to real female experience and expression in a patriarchal society.

¹⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 10, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 143-44, 15.

critique sympathy in *Jane Eyre* as a predominantly normalizing mode of emotional identification that can solidify individual and group identities, but at the expense of excluded others. Rai traces “the narrative of Jane’s assumption of a sympathetic police-agency”; and Nandrea describes as the “triumph of sympathy” the oft-noted “manner in which the end of the novel emphasizes Jane’s success in eliminating all possible threats to her newly attained subject position” through “a systematic negation of others and otherness.”¹⁹ Yet while Rai and Nandrea critique a dominant narrative of the “triumph of sympathy” in *Jane Eyre*, Rai also maintains that “the trajectory of Jane’s assumption of power gives off a certain haunting,” a faint, mainly disavowed “signal [of] the possibility of another relationship between subjectivity, sympathy and spirituality.”²⁰ Nandrea more thoroughly engages with an affective “undercurrent to the major narrative trajectory of the text,” one that, she argues, revels in the “disempowering pleasures of sensibility.”²¹ Both usefully seek to uncover additional affective facets of *Jane Eyre*, suggesting that a critique of sympathy’s problematic imperative of identification need not entail a critical rejection of all emotional connections within (or, to a certain extent, with) the novel.

If we heed Brontë’s call “for shame,” acknowledging it as a central affective strand of *Jane Eyre*—one that insistently appears in the form of compelling spectacles of relational difference—we can recognize the novel as less a triumphant march toward normalizing identification than an exploration of shame as an alternative for shaping individuated, intimate social relations. Insofar as shame encompasses, for Brontë, a mode of readerly engagement, its insistent presence in *Jane Eyre* asks us to think again about the ideological implications of the relationship between emotion and

¹⁹ Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race and Power, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 99; Nandrea, 119.

²⁰ Rai, 103-104.

²¹ Nandrea, 119.

form in the development of the nineteenth-century novel. Indeed, shame's role in *Jane Eyre* as an affective mediator between coercive over-identification and potentially alienating emotional ruptures perhaps accounts for the rapt scrutiny the novel continues to inspire in readers looking to Victorian literature to find points of affinity with—as well as instructive differences from—current investments in issues of affect, gender, identification, and novel form. “Pain, shame, ire”: as critics responsive to, while also thinking and telling about, the affective impact of novels, we might find ourselves suggestively, because imperfectly, reflected in Jane's hope, and Brontë's seeming confidence, that the registering and narrating of such conflicting feelings could forward productive forms of individual and relational happiness.

CODA

“AT THE BOTTOM OF ALL”

More than a striking instance of novelistic shame, George Du Maurier's *Trilby* would seem to be the Victorian novel par excellence of superficial sensation. The wildly popular work, first published in 1894, sparked a transatlantic marketing sensation. “Trilby-mania” involved popular serialized and book editions of the novel, but also spun off into Trilby-inspired stage plays and periodical articles, as well as a wide array of products, ranging from hats to tooth-paste. Appropriately, the sensational plot of the novel itself thematizes superficial spells. Its heroine, Trilby O’Ferrall, is transformed into an international singing star whose artistry relies on Svengali’s exploitative mesmerism of her. At the novel’s end, after Trilby’s death, we learn that “*There were two Trilbys.*”¹ One was the warm and ostensibly *real* Trilby who was “an angel of paradise” (298); the other, “an unconscious Trilby of marble ... a singing-machine—an organ to play upon” (299). This human singing-machine is positioned as a performer nightmarishly detached from her own psychological agency and depth, and she also acts as a siren who casts superficial spells, as her performances produce automatic hysteria in teeming crowds.

It is useful to consider the novel as a timely rumination on superficial and self-alienating sensations—literary and otherwise—and much critical work has productively adopted this approach.² But I would like here to place *Trilby* in a different, if not wholly unrelated, context: that of nineteenth-century novelistic psychological realism, characterized by tropes of emotional depth. For while the

¹ George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 298. Further references will appear in the text.

² See, for example: Phyllis Weliver, “Music, Crowd Control, and the Female Performer in *Trilby*” in *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, eds. Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Lara Karpenko, “Purchasing Largely: *Trilby* and the Fin de Siècle Reader,” *Victorians Institute Journal* 34 (2006): 215-42.

novel's heroine is an uncanny figure of vacant performance when she becomes a singing sensation in the later parts of the novel, early in the novel she concretely embodies the potent Victorian metaphor of feminine character as hidden emotional depths. The novel's sensational conceit of these "two Trilbys" contained in a single female form can thus be read as the end-point of a century-long negotiation of novelistic investments in representing and cultivating deep feminine interiority. More specifically, *Trilby* marks the culmination of a nineteenth-century tendency to use spectacular novelistic displays of one particular emotion—*shame*—to negotiate anxieties about the presentation, circulation and development of ostensibly private and personal female interiorities through the increasingly commercial and popular form of the novel.

Early in *Trilby*, we get a striking display of shame's distinct role in novelistic underworlds of gendered emotion. In his second encounter with Trilby, the novel's hero, Little Billee, discovers an unexpected depth when he examines the quirky model who has been frequenting his art studio:

Then he looked into her freckled face, and met the kind and tender mirthfulness of her gaze and the plucky frankness of her fine wide smile with a thrill that was not aesthetic at all (nor the reverse), but all of the heart. And in one of his quick flashes of intuitive insight he divined far down beneath the shining surface of those eyes (which seemed for a moment to reflect only a little image of himself against the sky beyond the big north window) a well of sweetness; and floating somewhere in the midst of it the very heart of compassion, generosity, and warm sisterly love; and under that—alas! at the bottom of all—a thin slimy layer of sorrow and shame. (30-31)

Du Maurier, here, portrays the emotional range of his heroine as a hidden depth, lurking below the "shining surface" of physical features and expressions and yielding itself up only to the unique "intuitive insight" of Little Billee. And, within this vast emotional range, shame and sorrow are emotions set apart. Far from the easy legibility of physical and emotional surface, the "thin slimy layer of sorrow and shame" at the "bottom of all" forms the deepest limits of penetrating insight. This

penetrating insight marks the hero's aesthetic and affective perception *and* also defines the distinctive view constructed for readers of the psychological novel. The imagery of this "thin slimy layer" suggests a simultaneous fascination and repulsion attributed to Little Billee, and through his surrogate status as an insightful reader, to the novel reader who peers into a character's interiority. The uneasiness is intensified by the narrator's strange insistence that Little Billee's responding "thrill" is "not aesthetic at all" but also not "the reverse." The responsive reader's heart, it seems, must be expansive enough to appreciate Trilby's interiority as both an enticing aesthetic display *and* as something else—presumably something more authentic, "not aesthetic at all."

As the plot unfolds, shame especially condenses concerns over emotional display, as Trilby's interior exposure is put in close relation to a physical exposure that is portrayed as even more explicitly disturbing and improper: that of Trilby's nude modeling. The slimy shame that Little Billee perceives is the emotional correlate of Trilby's practice of nude modeling or, as she breezily puts it, of posing "for the altogether" (15). The shame that Little Billee sees "at the bottom of all" provides the first clue of this blot on Trilby's femininity. But, her capacity for shame—even more than for sorrow—is *also* perceived, by him, as the key to its eventual erasure. However, even as shame is positioned as the antidote to Trilby's indecent self-exposure, simply waiting to be raised by Little Billee to the surface, this antidote is threatened by an association between the scandalous exhibition of her nude body and the exhibition of her even more private emotional makeup, available only to a particularly insightful and intimate reader. The dramatic slippage between a shamefully exposed, eroticized body and an open mind suggests Du Maurier's anxieties around the novel's growing role in the cultural production and display of domestic femininity and also provides a site for self-reflexive negotiations of that role.

Despite Little Billee's insistent marriage proposals to Trilby and his faith that she will make an ideal wife once shame has transformed her, the novel clings to the impossibility of Trilby, the nude figure model, ever quite fitting the mold of the Victorian domestic paragon. The shame that is laid bare for Little Billee and the reader is the uncomfortable seat of deep feminine interiority that becomes increasingly troublesome as the plot progresses. On the one hand, Trilby's possession of hidden yet ultimately accessible shame—shame that can be penetrated by “intuitive insight”—is the guarantee of her complex and authentic subjectivity, and of her submerged suitability for domesticity. Her possession of other, more traditional emotional ingredients of the Angel in the House—qualities like “compassion,” “generosity,” and desexualized “warm sisterly love”—seem to rest on this layer of shame that troubles but can also animate and authenticate her other domestic feelings. Little Billee hones in on this shame and makes it the quality that, if properly raised and encouraged, can re-make the bohemian Trilby into a proper bourgeois wife. However, as the narrative progresses this shame also represents the sole, indelible signifier of qualities that make her fundamentally unsuitable as the wife of a middle-class English gentleman. Little Billie and Trilby enjoy a short engagement that is violently disrupted by his meddling relatives who successfully break off the relationship. These relatives are ushered into the narrative as representatives of British bourgeois hypocrisy and an unfair sexual double standard, but despite this overt castigation, the novel never shakes the sense that they still might be right about an essential mismatch between a former model for the “altogether” and a British husband, even one as progressive and open-minded as the artist Little Billee.

While Little Billee's family wields shame as the tool of a repressively narrow demand for absolute feminine modesty and chastity, the novel's lingering on Trilby's shame cannot be reduced to *just* this repressive function. We can see the novel's

spectacles of shame as *also* working in a less repressive and more productively critical light if we consider Du Maurier's lingering on Trilby's shame to be illuminating a broader tension within novelistic psychological realism. This broader tension is between, on the one hand, the novelistic dependency on exposing private feminine feelings in order to reproduce and reinforce domesticity, and, on the other hand, the anxiety that such exposure inevitably forms subjectivities that—*because* of the taint of artistic production and public display and circulation—can never fully be reconciled with the ideological domestic space for which they are being shaped. Little Billee's relatives conceptually distinguish the ruined Trilby from other pure, marriageable English women. However, the novel does not posit an essential incompatibility between Trilby and a domestic sphere that could accommodate other, less shameful women. Instead, Trilby's unstable relation to the domestic sphere stages a more thoroughgoing tension between the concept of the Victorian domestic paragon and the popular novel form employed over the period in this paragon's reproduction.

Little Billee's developing conception of Trilby's deep layer of shame exemplifies a cultural belief that natural feminine emotion can remake her, if only brought to the surface. This surfacing of shame has two related facets: one, a literal clothing of Trilby that will end her actual practices of nude modeling; the other, a more metaphoric clothing that will raise to her consciousness a proper sense of feminine modesty. Physical and psychological indecency are particularly linked in the notion, repeatedly voiced by the narrator, that Trilby needs to be both "clothed" and put in her "right mind." The narrator contrasts the praise of artists who painted Trilby in the nude with his own experience, stating, "For myself, I only speak of Trilby as I have seen her—clothed and in her right mind" (67). However, the scene in which Trilby's shame actually rises to the psychological surface greatly challenges any confident yoking of the influencing of a mind through shame and the modest clothing

of that mind. While Little Billee is initially troubled, yet fascinated, by his insight into Trilby's shame, his sight of its *material* exhibition, when he unexpectedly finds her modeling nude in an art class, simply causes him to bolt in shock and disgust. As Trilby ponders Little Billee's abrupt departure, shame finally rises into her own consciousness, put on vivid display for the reader:

But Trilby was much disquieted, and fell to wondering what on earth was the matter.

At first she wondered in French: French of the Quartier Latin. She had not seen Little Billee for a week, and wondered if he were ill. She had looked forward so much to his painting her—painting her beautifully—and hoped he would soon come back, and lose no time.

Then she began to wonder in English—nice clean English of the studio in the Place St Anatole des Arts—her father's English—and suddenly a quick thought pierced her through and through, and made the flesh tingle on her insteps and the backs of her hands, and bathed her brow and temples with sweat . . .

Could it be possible that he was *shocked* at seeing her sitting there? . . .

She turned alternately pale and red, pale and red all over, again and again, as the thought grew up in her—and soon the growing thought became a torment.

This new-born feeling of shame was unendurable—its birth a travail that racked and rent every fibre of her moral being, and she suffered agonies beyond anything she had ever felt in her life. (82)

Rather than clothing her, the experience of shame, here, seems to further expose her. The narrative depiction of her shamed interiority—her “growing thought”—merges with her bare flesh and even further emphasizes and eroticizes her nude body, as she turns “alternately pale and red, pale and red all over, again and again.” The reinforcing spectacles of shamed thoughts and exposed flesh cast the narrator's act of minute interior description as itself an indecent invasion and exposure. It is significantly the *presence* of shame, rather than shame's lack, that constitutes and even accentuates the very exposure that makes Trilby an unsuitable wife. The shame that earlier served as a guarantee of Trilby's domestic potential proves much more difficult to mold to respectable contours when it must undergo literary depiction.

This difficulty appears especially aligned with specifically *novelistic* deployments of shame if we remember that it is a crash course in novel-reading that has partially ushered Trilby toward this moment. Little Billee and his two English friends share the narrator's sentiments that Trilby would be better if clothed and in her right mind, and contribute to this righting of her mind and speech with the "nice clean English" of their studio, where they lend her "English books: Dickens. Thackeray, Walter Scott." Through this reading Trilby "grew more English every day" (64). This burgeoning Englishness culminates in the thought of shame that "grew up in her" in this passage. Thus, for Trilby to "wonder in English" is to wonder in *novelistic* English. Accordingly, Trilby figures here a character whose thoughts are being exposed in the novel we read *and* a woman whose thoughts are themselves formed by novel reading. Both registers of novelistic interiority are haunted by the specter of indecent public exposure that seems further intensified by their intersection. The domestic woman is dually threatened, by the feminine exposure within psychological realism *and* by her formation and consumption of her own interiority—the making of her mind—through the commercial, widely distributed, and emotionally enthralling form of the novel. Trilby's densely accumulating shame and its ambiguous worth suggests that shame's centrality in nineteenth-century literary characterization emanates in part from its capacity to register these broader concerns over both the depiction and fashioning of the emotive domestic women through art, especially the art of the popular novel.

The uneasy slippage between Trilby's deep, private interior shame and the exposed, aestheticized nude modeling that her shame signifies—and even animates—finds a counterpart in the "two Trilbys" that the character eventually splits into, as Trilby is transformed by Svengali into a world-renowned star. One Trilby, the seemingly real Trilby, appears naturally to have the perfect affective makeup for

domesticity, which is only thwarted by middle-class prejudice against her past. But the other Trilby, who succumbs to Svengali's mesmerism, is a moving but completely aesthetic amalgamation devoid herself of any sincere sensations, meaningful legibility or affective authenticity. The novel's sensational containment of both Trilbys in one female character continues the blurring of clean distinctions between the natural domestic woman and an aesthetic production, and shame especially continues to trouble—even as it is invoked to mark—clear delineations of the naturally emotive and the artificially constructed woman.

Yet Trilby's incarnation as La Svengali, singing for raving crowds, brings with it another striking spectacle of shame. In this instance, Little Billee does not merely perceive but actively produces the scene's shame as he watches Trilby sing. Trilby's performance revives his characteristic affective sensitivity, which has been deadened since his engagement with Trilby was broken off. He discovers:

[T]hat heavenly glimpse beyond the veil! And with it a crushing sense of his own infinitesimal significance by the side of this glorious pair of artists, one of whom had been his friend and the other his love—a love who had offered to be his humble mistress and slave, not feeling herself good enough to be his wife!

It made him sick and faint to remember, and filled him with hot shame, and then and there his love for Trilby became as that of a dog for its master! (214)

Little Billee's sense of shame is no longer, as it was at the novel's start, an anxious honing in on Trilby's inappropriate aesthetic display. Instead his "hot shame" is an erotically overwhelming *appreciation* of Trilby's artistry, even as this moving performance acts as an extension, even an exaggeration, of the shamefully public, commercial self-displays of her past modeling. This moment revives his memory of the past humbling that brought Trilby closest to domestic suitability, and juxtaposes it with a shameful indulgence in the pleasures of feminine artifice. Shame finally—albeit still uneasily—links the *near-domestic* and the *purely* aesthetic woman in not just Trilby's single body, but in Little Billee's experience of intense affective response to

its aesthetic display.

In *Trilby*, then, shame comes to signify the ultimate emotional depth and burgeoning emotional restraint of an essentially respectable woman *as well as* the height of erotically charged, potentially overwhelming aesthetic engagement. This unstable oscillation highlights two related concerns that characterize not just *Trilby* but novelistic displays of feminine interiority throughout the nineteenth century. The first concern is what kind of women are being made by the novel's increasingly full display and mass-circulation of feminine interiority? Will the inescapable taint of a public and commercial aesthetic extend to—and perhaps even ruin—the receptive domestic reader? The second concern regards the eager response to, and even demand for, this display of interiority. What are both male and female readers responding to in these popular displays of feminine interiority? Are readers learning to recognize, analyze and emulate emotional depths? Or are they being trained, perhaps like a dog by its master, to value and succumb to aesthetic illusions, even as those illusions could poison the affective well of interiority through inappropriate and unnatural indulgences and exhibitions?

Thus Du Maurier's iconic image of two Trilbys contained in one beautiful form might seem a particularly extreme cautionary tale of the necessary evacuation of agency lurking within feminized emotional susceptibilities. But I would like to conclude with the suggestion that it figures a more conciliatory recognition—even appreciation—of the necessary artistry constructing gendered subjectivity, and thus continues the attempts we have seen in the novels of Austen, Brontë and Thackeray to destabilize cultural attempts to naturalize and denigrate the emotional makeup of the domestic woman. A suggestive end-point for the novelistic engagement with shame I have traced over the century, *Trilby* reveals a lingering if increasingly skeptical investment in shame, at the century's end, as a possible aesthetic and relational

alternative to absolute, unreflective emotional submission. Further, *Trilby*'s complicated, often contradictory deployments of shame—much like the broader novelistic negotiations of shame that it both thematizes and carries on—can be distinguished from understandings of shame as a merely repressive force in the nineteenth-century novel, and considered instead a valuable form of potential recognition, and at times resolution, of the complex interplay between aesthetics, emotions, and femininity.

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